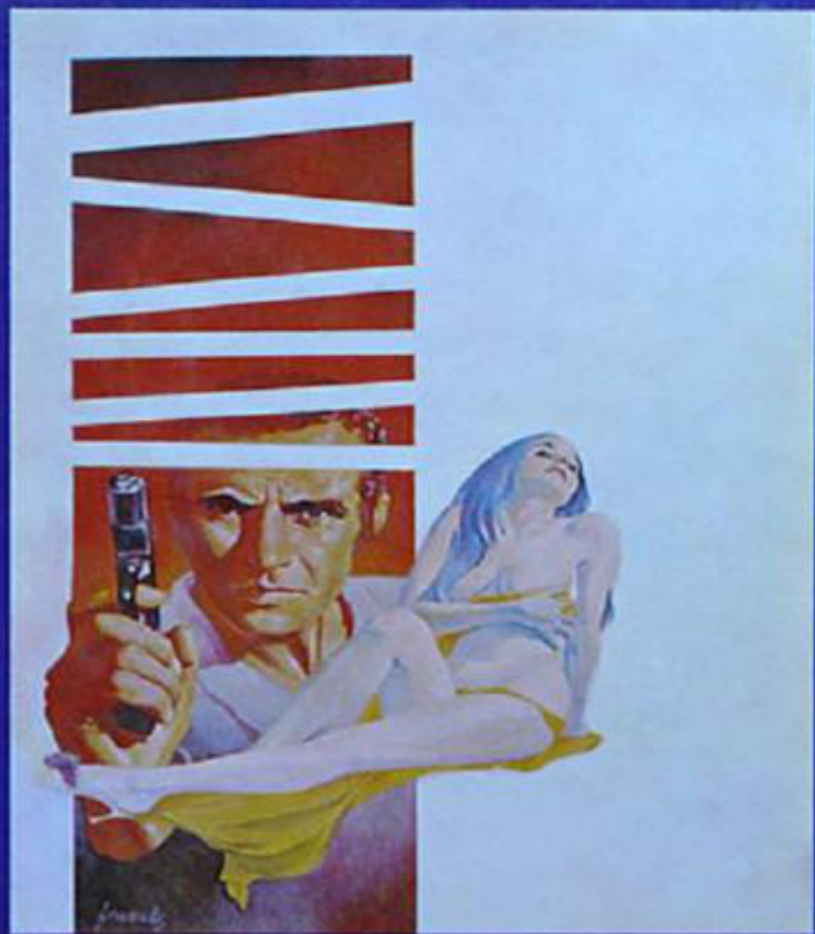


JAMES HADLEY CHASE



A LOTUS FOR MISS QUON

A Lotus for Miss Quon

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chapter one

I

He had come upon the diamonds one hot Sunday afternoon in January.

It had happened in this way: he had had a solitary lunch prepared by Dong Ham, his cook and served by Haum, his houseboy, and then he had gone up to his bedroom for a siesta. In spite of the air-conditioned coolness of the room, he had been unable to sleep. He had listened with growing irritation to the high-pitched chatter of his servants below, the discordant sound of someone's distant radio playing Vietnamese music and the nerve shattering racket of passing motor cycles.

Usually, he was able to sleep in the afternoon in spite of the noise, but this afternoon he had found sleep impossible. He had reached for a cigarette, lit it and then resigned himself to the depression of his thoughts.

He had come to loathe Sundays in Saigon. When he had first arrived, he had found the social round amusing, but now it bored him. He was bored by the same faces, the same idiotic: small-talk, the same dreary scandals, and he had gradually withdrawn from the set who ate, drank, and danced together day in and night out.

During the week, he had his work to distract him. He worked for a shipping company — not a particularly interesting job, but the pay was good: a lot better than he could have hoped to have earned back home in San Francisco. He needed money for he had extravagant tastes: he drank more than was good for him, and also he was saddled with monthly payments to his ex-wife who had divorced him a few months before he had sailed to the Far East.

Now as he lay on the bed, feeling a trickle of sweat running down his massive chest, he thought bleakly that in three days' time, he would have to send his wife yet another cheque. He had only 8,000 piastres in the bank. When she had been paid, he would have very little left to last him to the end of the month which was quite some time ahead.

Well, it served him right, he thought. He had been reckless to have bought that picture. It had been quite an unnecessary extravagance, but all the same, he thought of it with great pleasure. He had come across it in a dealer's shop in Duong Tu-Do, and it had immediately arrested his attention. It was an oil painting of a Vietnamese girl wearing the national dress of white silk trousers, a pale-blue sheath tunic and a conical straw hat. She was posed against a white wall over which climbed a rose-coloured bougainvillea. It was a set piece, but well painted, and the girl reminded him of Nhan. She had the same innocent expression; the same childish way of standing, even the same doll-like features. The girl in the painting could have been Nhan but for the fact he knew Nhan had never posed for an artist.

It was then that he remembered the picture was still unpacked and still had to be hung. He felt the urge to see how it looked on the wall in the downstairs room. Eager for an excuse to do something other than lying on his bed, he got up and walked barefooted down the stairs into the living room.

Haum, his houseboy, was leisurely polishing the dining room table. He looked up in startled surprise as Jaffe came into the room.

Haum was thirty-six years old. He was thin and small and his brown-skinned face had a pointed, foxy look. Although small and brittle-looking, he worked well and seemed able to undertake the heaviest tasks without appearing to tire.

"Get me a hammer, a good-sized nail and the steps," Jaffe said. Then as Haum gaped at him as if he thought he had gone out of his mind, he went on, "I have bought a picture. I want to hang it on the wall."

Haum's face cleared. He smiled, revealing gold-capped teeth.

"At once, sir," he said and went swiftly from the room.

Jaffe went over to where the painting stood against the wall, still in its paper and string. He stripped off the paper and stood the painting on the table and looked at it.

He was still regarding it with a half-smile when Haum came in with the stepladder, a hammer, and a nail clenched in his teeth. He set the ladder against the empty wall where the picture was to hang, then moved curiously to Jaffe's side to examine the picture.

Jaffe watched him as he looked at the picture. There was no change of expression, but he was aware that there was a disapproving

atmosphere which was felt but not seen. He knew that Haum didn't approve of him having a Vietnamese mistress and he knew too that Haum thought that by hanging this picture on the wall, Jaffe was deliberately rubbing Haum's nose in the fact that he did have a Vietnamese mistress.

This was, of course, not so. Jaffe minded very much what his servants thought of him. He minded what anyone thought of him. He had always been careful about his relations with Nhan. It was important to him that neither she nor he should be the subject of gossip, but here in Saigon, it was impossible to keep anything quiet: particularly an association between a man and a woman.

With a rapidity that angered and amazed Jaffe, the news that he had met a Vietnamese taxi-dancer at the Paradise Club in Cholon, and had fallen in love with her and she came regularly to his house had spread throughout the Saigon European community in next to no time. This in spite of the fact that he had taken every precaution not to be exposed to gossip. Nhan came only after dark. She slipped into the house like a ghost. She invariably left before dawn, yet all the European residents knew what was going on and gossiped about it in that bored, sophisticated way they have in Saigon when discussing other people's sexual adventures.

Although his two servants slept in a little building just across the courtyard that served both as a kitchen and their sleeping quarters, they too knew when Nhan visited him, but being Vietnamese, they were more intolerant and more critical than his European friends. They hinted silently by their attitude and expressions that he had lost face by taking a Vietnamese girl as a mistress instead of one of the many married or unmarried European women who were to be had for the asking.

Jaffe had met Nhan Lee Quon one evening at the Paradise Club in Cholon: a dimly-lit, noisy dance hall where unattached Europeans mixed with the Chinese and the Vietnamese in search of female company.

The Club was run by a fat, cheerful Chinese who called himself Blackie Lee. He ran the club at a considerable profit, and because of his big clientele, he was able to hire the prettiest and youngest Vietnamese and Chinese girls.

The girls could be hired for about 120 piastres an hour or roughly a dollar and a half of American money. Their job was to dance with

you, to share your table and talk with you if you felt disinclined to dance, and generally keep you company. If you wished to develop the association, then you made your own arrangements with the girl. This was something Blackie Lee didn't want to know about. The girls were hired by him from nine-thirty p.m. until midnight when restrictions imposed by the authorities forced all dancehalls and every form of night life to close down. So if you were in a hurry, you paid Blackie for the girl's time, paid the doorman fifty piastres and left with the girl who either took you to her apartment or to a hotel for a sum you had agreed upon before leaving the club.

When Jaffe had first come to Saigon, he had felt the urgent need of female company. For the first two or three months, he had followed the recognized procedure and had slept with the numerous married European women who had nothing better to do than to exploit their somewhat tarnished sexual attractions, but he quickly found such associations led to complications, and he wanted, more than anything else, to lead an uncomplicated life.

A friend of his, Charles Mayhew, an old man who had lived for years in the Far East, had advised him to take a Vietnamese or a Chinese girl for a mistress.

"A man needs a woman in this climate," he had said. "The trouble in this town is that the vast majority of European women have nothing to do. Their servants do everything for them. When a woman has nothing to do, she can get into mischief just as quickly as any man who has nothing to do. This is, of course, one of the evils of the East. Women who come out here find they have the whole day on their hands and those with the inclination, look around for an unattached man. They are the ones to beware of. If I had my time over again, I wouldn't have anything to do with a European woman unless I intended to marry her. I would take a Vietnamese or a Chinese girl, and I advise you to do the same."

Jaffe had shaken his head with a grimace.

"Not for me," he said. "I don't care for coloured women."

Mayhew had laughed.

"I'll tell you this: an Asian girl is far less complicated and demanding than a European girl. She is far less expensive and considerably more competent in bed. You must remember that Asian women have a tradition for pandering to the comfort and wishes of men, and that is

important. You talk to Blackie Lee. He'll find you someone. Not all his taxi girls are prostitutes, you know. He has quite a few who are very decent and hardworking. You talk to him. He'll find you someone."

"Thanks for the suggestion," Jaffe said, "but not for me."

Eventually, however, it was the boredom and the loneliness of the weekends that finally drove Jaffe to the Paradise Club. He had been surprised by the friendly atmosphere of the place and equally surprised that the evening had passed so quickly. He had danced with a number of the girls and had found them amusing. He had spent some time drinking whisky with Blackie Lee and he had found the fat Chinese pleasant company. The evening didn't cost him all that much either.

Jaffe began to go to the club regularly. It certainly solved the problem of what to do with himself in the evenings. A Month or Mater, Blackie Lee had casually suggested Jaffe should take a regular girl.

"There is a girl who could do with some help," he had said. "She has a big family to support. I've talked to her, and she's willing. It's better to have regular girl. Do you want to meet her?"

"What's this about a big family?" Jaffe had asked, frowning. "Do you mean she's married with a string of kids?"

Blackie Lee had giggled.

"She isn't married. She has a mother, three young brothers and an old uncle to support. I'll send her over. If she suits you, tell her. I've fixed everything."

"Well, I don't know," Jaffe had said, but he was interested. "Let's see her anyway."

It was while Jaffe was standing on the step ladder, carefully marking with a pencil the place where he was to drive the nail on which to hang the picture, that he recalled his first meeting with Nhan Lee Quon.

He had been sitting at a table well away from the noisy Philippine band. The dance floor was crowded. The lighting in the hall was so dim that it was impossible to distinguish the dancer's features. It was impossible too to recognize anyone sitting within ten feet of you, and this obscurity gave him a sense of relaxation and isolation.

Nhan Lee Quon had appeared by his side, silently and unexpectedly. He had been looking down the aisle between the tables, hoping to catch sight of her before she reached his table, but she had approached him from behind.

She was wearing the Vietnam national costume. She had on white silk trousers over which was a rose-coloured tunic sheath of nylon. Her black glossy hair was parted in the centre of her small head and hung in soft waves to her shoulders. Her perfect skin was the colour of very old ivory. Her bridgeless nose, her lips, slightly thicker than the lips of a European woman, and her fine black eyes gave her a doll-like appearance. Her bone structure was so delicate that she reminded Jaffe of an intricate carving of ivory.

She smiled at him and he had never seen such strong white teeth. His eyes moved curiously from her face to her throat encased in the high collar of her tunic and then down to the two mounds that thrust out the rose-pink sheath in a pathetic but defiant voluptuousness.

Jaffe had heard all about the deceptiveness of the Vietnam girl's figure. Sam Wade who was something unimportant in the American Embassy had enlightened him when he had first come to Saigon.

"Look, fella," Wade had said, "don't let those curves kid you. These dolls are built like boys. They are as flat in front as they are behind. It was only when they saw Lollo and Bardot on the movies that they wised up to what they lacked. You take a walk through the market. You'll see where they get those shapes. I reckon a set of falsies is the hottest sales project in this police ridden hellhole of a city."

"I am Nhan Lee Quon," the girl had said as she sat down opposite Jaffe. She spoke excellent French. "You may call me Nhan."

They stared for a long moment at each other, then Jaffe stubbed out his cigarette, aware of a sudden tingling excitement.

"I'm Steve Jaffe," he said. "You may call me Steve."

It had been as simple as that.

Jaffe reached down for the nail which Haum gave him. He positioned the point of the nail exactly on his pencil mark, then he accepted the hammer Haum handed up to him. He gave the head of the nail a sharp tap.

In this way, he found the diamonds.

II

Under the impact of the hammer against the head of the nail, a six-inch square segment of the wall collapsed in a flurry of plaster and dust, revealing a deep hole.

Jaffe, poised on the stepladder, stared with consternation at the damage he had caused, then he said violently, "Oh, double hell!"

Haum, expressing himself in the Vietnamese manner of showing grief, laughed in a high cackle that infuriated Jaffe.

"Oh, shut up!" He exclaimed and put the hammer down on the top rung of the ladder. "Why goddam it, the wall's made of paper!"

Then it occurred to him that the wall wasn't made of paper but was at least the thickness of two feet, and the hole in the wall was a cunning hiding place: a hidden safe which probably had been there for a long time.

Cautiously, he dipped his hand into the dark opening. His fingers touched something. He lifted out a small leather bag, and as he did so, the rotten bottom of the bag disintegrated, and from it poured bright, sparkling objects that bounced on the parquet floor.

He recognized the tiny objects as diamonds. They made a disjointed pattern of fiery brilliance around the foot of the ladder. He stared down at their glittering magnificence. Although his knowledge of diamonds was no more than the average man's, he knew these stones were worth an enormous sum of money. There seemed to be at least a hundred of them; the majority of them were the size of pea seeds. He felt his mouth turn dry and his heart begin to thump with excitement.

Squatting down on his haunches, Haum made a tutting sound with his tongue; a sound the Vietnamese make when they are excited. He picked up one of the diamonds and examined it.

Jaffe watched him.

There was a long pause, then Haum glanced up and the two men stared at each other. With some hesitancy because of Jaffe's tenseness,

Haum smiled, revealing his gold-capped teeth.

“These diamonds, sir,” he said, “belonged to General Nguyen Van Tho. The police have been searching for them for years.”

Very slowly, as if he were walking on egg shells, Jaffe climbed down from the ladder and squatted beside his servant.

Jaffe was an immensely powerfully-built man. He was over six feet tall. His shoulder span would have satisfied two averagely built Europeans. In his younger days, he had been a fanatical physical culture enthusiast. He had gone in for weightlifting, football, boxing and wrestling. Even after a five year layoff, he was still in pretty good condition, and as he squatted down beside Haum, the physical difference between the two men was sharply contrasted. Beside Jaffe's muscular bulk, the Vietnamese seemed like an undernourished pigmy.

Jaffe picked up one of the diamonds and rolled it between his fingers.

These stones, he thought, must be worth a million dollars — probably more. Talk about the Jaffe luck! I drive a goddam nail into a goddam wall and make a goddam fortune!

Haum said, “The general was a very rich man. It was known that he had bought diamonds. Then the bomb killed him. His Excellency will be very pleased the diamonds have been found.”

Jaffe felt his heart give a little kick against his ribs. He looked at Haum who was smiling happily at the diamond he was holding.

“What are you talking about?” Jaffe asked. He straightened up, towering above the squatting Vietnamese. “What general?”

“General Nguyen Van Tho,” Haum said. “He was in the pay of the French. He did much harm before the bomb killed him. He robbed the Army of much money and with the money he bought these diamonds. Before he could get away, the bomb went off.”

Jaffe moved over to the table and picking up a pack of cigarettes, he shook out a cigarette and lit it. He noticed his hand was unsteady.

“What makes you think these diamonds belong to the general?” he asked, thinking here was an immediate complication. He suddenly remembered that Haum was an ardent supporter of the present regime and that he had a photograph of President Ngo-Dinh-Diem hanging in the cook house. He remembered too that Haum went twice a week to

attend a course in political science. He suddenly realized the significance of these facts. It was sheer bad luck that this little Vietnamese should have been in the room when Jaffe had found the diamonds.

He would have to handle this situation carefully, Jaffe thought, if he was going to keep the diamonds, and he had every intention of keeping them.

“Who else could they belong to?” Haum asked. He began to pick up the diamonds, collecting them in the palm of his hand. “This house was once owned by Mai Chang.”

Scarcely listening, Jaffe was thinking, the little swine is handling those stones as if they belong to him. If I’m not careful, he’ll march out of here and hand them to his precious President.

“Who is Mai Chang?” he asked and then his mind shifted to the problem of how to dispose of the diamonds. Certainly not in Vietnam. He would have to smuggle them into Hong Kong; he would have no difficulty in selling them there.

“She was the general’s woman,” Haum said contemptuously. “When he died, she went to prison. This was her house. The general must have hidden these stones here for safety.”

“If the authorities knew the woman lived here, why didn’t they come and find the diamonds?” Jaffe asked.

“It was thought the diamonds had been stolen,” Haum said, reaching under a chair to pick up a stray diamond. “It was supposed the general had them on him when the bomb went off, and in the confusion, someone took them from his body.”

“What bomb?” Jaffe asked, merely to gain a little time. He was wondering how he could persuade Haum to keep quiet about the diamonds. He would have to be very tactful. He would have to give Haum a face-saving reason why he should hand the diamonds over to him and to persuade him to accept some of the proceeds. Jaffe couldn’t imagine Haum would refuse a sum of money if it were offered to him in a diplomatic way.

“It was while the general was trying to escape that someone threw a bomb at him,” Haum said. He stood up and stared at the diamonds glittering in his hand.

Jaffe moved to his desk and took out a white envelope from the paper rack. Casually, he approached Haum. Tut them in here,” he said, pinching open the envelope. Haum hesitated, then he poured the diamonds into the envelope. He made a tentative move to take the envelope from Jaffe, but Jaffe had already started to move away from him. Jaffe licked the flap of the envelope, then sealed it. He put the envelope in the hip pocket of his shorts.

A worried expression came over Haum’s brown face.

“It would be better, sir, to call the police,” he said. “They will want to see the wall. I will tell them how you found the diamonds. In this way, there will be no complications.”

Jaffe stubbed out his cigarette. He was feeling slightly more relaxed. At least he had got the diamonds away from Haum. That was a step in the right direction. He must now attempt to persuade Haum to keep his mouth shut.

“Don’t let’s be in too great a hurry about this,” he said, and moving over to an armchair, he sat down. “I don’t believe these diamonds did belong to the general. If I took the trouble to check on the various owners of this house, I’m sure I’d find the diamonds belonged to someone long dead and who lived here long before the general came here. It is more than possible that the general’s diamonds were stolen at the time of his death.”

Haum gazed at him ; his face expressionless. Jaffe could see the little man wasn’t impressed by what he had said and he felt a wave of irritation run through him.

“That is for the police to decide, sir,” Haum said. “If the diamonds belong to the general, his Excellency will be very pleased to recover them, and you will be highly honoured.”

“Well, that’s nice to know,” Jaffe said sarcastically, “but it so happens I’m not interested in honours. Besides, the police will naturally claim they do belong to the general.” He attempted a stiff smile. “You know what policemen are like.”

He saw this was a mistake for Haum lost his worried expression and became suddenly hostile.

The diamonds, sir, belong to the State whether or not they once belonged to the general. It is not for anyone except the State to decide what to do with them.”

“That’s your opinion,” Jaffe said, his voice curt. “I could sell these diamonds. Naturally, I would give you a share. You could become a rich man, Haum.”

Well, there it is, he thought. Now the cards are on the table. What’s the little bastard going to do?

Haum stiffened. His black eyes opened to their widest extent.

“It would be against the regulations to sell the diamonds,” he said.

“The authorities won’t know about it,” Jaffe said. “I can sell the diamonds and I will give you a share.”

“I think it would be better to tell the police, sir,” Haum said stiffly.

“Don’t you want to become rich?” Jaffe felt the hopelessness of trying to corrupt this little man, but he wasn’t going to give up without a struggle. “You could have a house of your own and servants. You could marry that girl of yours who is always hanging around here. You could buy a car.”

Haum lifted his shoulders.

“The diamonds, sir, are not mine to sell, nor yours. They belong to the State.”

Well, that’s that, Jaffe thought. He felt a sudden vicious rage take hold of him. Here I have a million bucks in my pocket and because of this damn yellow monkey, the money’s going down the drain. There must be some way out of this jam. To give up a million dollars!

Haum said, “If you will excuse me, sir, it is my afternoon off. I have an appointment.”

It suddenly flashed into Jaffe’s mind that once Haum left the room, he would first tell Dong Ham, the cook, about the diamonds, then dash off to the police station and within ten minutes, the house would be full of trigger-happy policemen. He got quickly to his feet and stepped between Haum and the door leading to the courtyard.

“Now, wait a minute,” he said, “you’re going to keep your goddam mouth shut about this or I’ll skin you alive!”

He had no idea how menacing he looked when he was angry. His huge, towering figure, his hard, angry expression and the viciousness

in his voice struck terror into Haum. The Vietnamese had now only one thought: to get out of the room and tell the police about the diamonds. He darted around the table, along the wall, putting the table between himself and Jaffe, and then made a wild dash for the door.

In spite of his size, Jaffe had perfect balance and his body, still hard in spite of his drinking and his lack of exercise, responded to his quick mind to a degree Haum hadn't suspected.

As Haum's sweating fingers closed over the door handle, Jaffe's fingers closed over his shoulder and jerked him around. Haum was horrified by the strength of those fingers. It was as if his flesh was being squeezed in steel pincers. The agony of the grip made him cry out: a thin scream like that of a terrified rabbit. He tried to break free, struck feebly at Jaffe's wrist, then opened his mouth to scream again.

Jaffe clamped his hand over Haum's mouth, digging his fingers into the Vietnamese's face, cutting off his scream. Haum writhed in the grip, trying to bite Jaffe's hand while he kicked at Jaffe's legs: his soft soled shoes making no impression on Jaffe's hard muscles.

"Shut up!" Jaffe snarled and gave the Vietnamese a vicious shake.

He heard a faint dry sound like the snapping of a stick. Haum's face suddenly became heavy in his fingers and seemed to come adrift from his thin neck. Jaffe saw his eyes roll back and felt his knees sag. He found he was holding the Vietnamese up by his face and that his legs were no longer supporting him.

In sudden panic, Jaffe released his grip and watched Haum slide down against the wall and spread out on the floor like a doll whose sawdust had leaked away. He saw a trickle of bright-red blood coming from Haum's half-open mouth. He knelt beside the Vietnamese and touched him cautiously. "Hey . . . Haum! Hell! What's the matter with you?" Then with a shudder, he stood up. The full force of his predicament struck him. Haum was dead, and he had murdered him!

chapter two

I

With a violently thumping heart, Jaffe stared down at Haum's crumpled body. His immediate reaction was to get help. He turned to the telephone, but paused, frowning and shaking his head.

There was nothing anyone could do now for Haum. He was dead. This was not the moment to think of him, but of himself.

He looked at the ladder standing against the wall. Suppose he told the police that Haum had fallen off the ladder and had accidentally broken his neck?

His eyes shifted to the hole in the wall. The moment the police saw that hole they would suspect it had been a hiding place for something. They would remember that this house had once belonged to Mai Chang, General Nguyen Van Tho's mistress. It wouldn't take them long to assume that the general's diamonds had been hidden in the wall.

Jaffe moved over to Haum's body. He peered down at the little man. He saw the skin around Haum's mouth and throat was bruised and broken. These telltale marks would rule out any story of an accident with the ladder.

Suppose he told the police that he had come upon Haum stealing the diamonds and that Haum had attacked him and that during the struggle, Haum had been accidentally killed? Such a story might get him off a murder charge, but it would mean giving up the diamonds, and there was always the risk he would receive a prison sentence.

It was at this moment that Jaffe made up his mind that whatever the risk, he was going to stick to the diamonds, and having decided this, his panic subsided and he began to think more clearly.

If he could get to Hong Kong with the diamonds, he could get lost without any difficulty. He would be a very rich man. He could begin a new life. With the money from the sale of the diamonds, he would be free to do anything he liked. But the trick question was, of course:

how to get to Hong Kong?

He poured himself a stiff shot of whisky, drank half of it, then after he had lit a cigarette, he finished the drink.

You couldn't leave Vietnam just when you thought you would, he reminded himself. The authorities entangled all travellers in a web of restrictions and regulations. You first had to apply for an exit visa, and the granting of this could take a week. Then there were forms to fill in regarding the movement of currency. There were photographs to be supplied. He couldn't hope to get out under ten days, and in the meantime, what would be happening to Haum's body?

A sudden sound broke in on his thoughts that made him stiffen and set his heart thumping again. Someone was knocking on the back door!

He stood motionless, scarcely breathing while he listened.

The gentle knock came again, then he heard the back door creak open.

In a surge of panic, he stepped over Haum's body and moved into the kitchen, closing the sitting room door behind him.

Dong Ham, his cook, was standing on the top step, the back door half open and he peered cautiously into the kitchen.

The two men stared at each other.

Dong Ham appeared to be very old. His brown face was a network of wrinkles, like crushed parchment. His thin white hair grew in straggly wisps from his bony skull. Wisps of white hair sprouted from his chin. He wore a black high-collared jacket and black trousers.

Had he heard Haum's cry for help? Jaffe wondered. It was possible that he had; why else should he be standing here? He never entered the house. His place was in the cookhouse across the courtyard, and yet here he was about to walk in, and Jaffe was sure if he hadn't moved so quickly, the old man would have come into the sitting room.

"What is it?" Jaffe asked, aware his voice sounded husky.

Dong Ham picked at a lump of hard skin on the side of his hand. His watery black eyes shifted from Jaffe to the door leading to the sitting room.

"Haum is wanted, sir," he said. He spoke French badly and slowly. He

pushed back the door and moved to one side so Jaffe had a clear view of the outer courtyard and the cookhouse.

Standing in the shade of the cookhouse building was a Vietnamese girl. She was in white and her conical straw hat hid her face. For a moment, Jaffe thought she was Nhan, and his heart gave a little lurch of surprise, then the girl looked up and he saw she was Haum's fiancée.

Jaffe had often seen this girl waiting with Asian patience for Haum to finish his work. Haum had told him he planned to marry the girl when he had finished his political studies.

Jaffe had never paid any attention to the girl. He had only been vaguely aware of her when he went out to get the car from the garage, but now, he stared at her, realizing how dangerous she could be to him.

How long had she been here? he wondered. Had she too heard Haum's cry?

The girl looked very young. She wore her hair in a ponytail that hung in a black thick rope to her tiny waist. For a Vietnamese, he thought, she was very plain and unattractive.

By the tense way she was standing and by her staring alarmed eyes, Jaffe was sure she had heard the cry, but had she recognized Haum's voice?

Jaffe suddenly became aware that both the old man and the girl were regarding him in a hostile, suspicious way, although both of them were obviously uncertain of themselves and frightened.

Jaffe said the first thing that came into his mind: "Haum has gone out. I have lent him to a friend to help with a dinner party. It's no use you waiting for him. He won't be back until late."

Dong Ham slowly backed down the three steps that led up to the kitchen. His wrinkled face was expressionless. Jaffe looked quickly at the girl. She had lowered her head. The straw hat hid her face.

He crossed to the back door and shut it gently, then very quietly he slid home the bolt. Then he stepped to the shuttered window and peered through one of the slits into the courtyard.

The old man was staring blankly at the closed door and he picked

nervously at the hard skin of his hand. The girl too was staring at the door. She said something. The old man went to her with slow, shuffling steps. They began jabbering together: their voices discordant and loud in the hot silence of the courtyard.

Not a good lie, Jaffe thought uneasily, but the best he could have thought of in the circumstances. He had had to say something. It was true that from time to time he did lend Haum to one or the other of his friends who happened to be throwing a party. On these occasions Haum always wore his white drill coat and trousers. He always spent some time in preparing himself. He enjoyed these outings, and invariably boasted to Dong Ham where he was going.

This Sunday, he had worn his blue working dress. He would never have gone to any of Jaffe's friends in this dress. The old man would know that. He and the girl had only to go to Haum's sleeping quarters, to find the white drill clothes and nail Jaffe's lie to the mast. Then what would they do? Jaffe wondered. He felt pretty certain they wouldn't have the initiative nor the courage to call the police. Even if they had heard Haum's cry and knew he was lying about Haum going out, they wouldn't go to the police. Probably they would wrangle and talk together for the rest of the evening. They would try to persuade each other they hadn't heard the cry. They would try to believe that Haum had gone out wearing his blue working clothes. But eventually, of course, they would be forced to accept the fact that something had happened to Haum, and then trouble would begin for Jaffe.

At least he had a little time. He felt certain these two would wait to see if Haum returned. They would wait until the morning, then, possibly, the girl would go to the police.

Jaffe returned to the sitting room. He stood looking down at Haum's body with revulsion. He felt tempted to go to someone and ask for help. Maybe if he went to the Embassy . . . He took a grip on himself.

I've got to keep my nerve, he said to himself. I've got to gain time. I've got to work out a way to get out of this goddam country. But first things first. I can't leave him lying here. Suppose someone called? You never knew who might drop in on a Sunday afternoon. I must get him upstairs and out of sight.

Steeling himself, he picked Haum up and carried him upstairs. The little man was a pathetically light burden: it was like carrying a child.

Jaffe went into his bedroom. He put Haum down gently on the floor,

then he went over to his big clothes closet, opened it, made space at the bottom of the closet and then put Haum in a sitting position in the closet, his back against the wall. He hastily shut the closet door. He turned the key and put it in his pocket.

Although the bedroom was cool, he went over to the air conditioner and turned the machine on fully. He was feeling slightly sick, and it irritated him that his legs felt boneless, and the muscles in his thighs were fluttering.

He went down the stairs and bolted the front door, then he went into the sitting room. Several large bottle flies were buzzing excitedly around the small patch of drying blood on the parquet floor. Grimacing, Jaffe looked from the blood to the hole in the wall and at the mess of dust and plaster on the floor. He must clear up this mess, he told himself. If someone came . . . He went into the kitchen but there was nothing there he could use to sweep up the dust or wipe off the blood. All the house things were kept in the cookhouse. This discovery worried him. He glanced through the slit in the shutter.

Dong Ham and the girl were out of sight, but he could hear their voices coming through the open window of Haum's room. They had probably discovered by now that Haum hadn't changed his clothes.

Jaffe took out his handkerchief, dipped it in water and then went back into the sitting room. He squatted down and wiped away the patch of blood. It left a brownish stain on the polished parquet, and although he scrubbed at it for some minutes, he couldn't get rid of it.

After he had flushed the soiled handkerchief down the toilet, he returned to pick up the largest pieces of plaster. Then he knelt and blew at the plaster dust, distributing it about the floor. It now didn't look quite so obvious. It was the best he could do. He wrapped the bits of plaster in a sheet of newspaper and left the small bundle on the table.

He would have to do something about the hole in the wall, he told himself. When the police eventually came and when they saw the hole, they would guess very quickly what had been in the hole.

He searched for and found the nail, then he climbed the ladder and gently tapped the nail into the wall, just above the hole. He reached down and picked up the picture and hung it in place, concealing the hole.

He stepped back and looked at the picture. There was just a chance

the police wouldn't think to look behind it: not much of a chance, but still, a chance.

He carried the ladder into the kitchen and put the hammer in the tool drawer. He felt the need for a drink and he went back into the sitting room and poured himself another stiff shot of whisky. As he lifted the glass to his lips, the telephone bell began to ring: a violent, persistent sound that shattered the silence in the room and made Jaffe start so violently the glass of whisky jumped out of his hand and smashed to pieces on the floor, spraying whisky and water over his bare feet.

He stood staring at the telephone, his heart contracting with shock.

Who could it be? Someone wanting to come round? Someone inviting him for a drink?

He was too frightened to answer the telephone. He might get caught up in one of those ghastly chit-chats that could go on and on and on.

He remained motionless, staring at the telephone. The bell continued to ring: the sound tore at his nerves. He realized that Dong Ham and the girl must also be listening to the bell. They were probably standing as motionless as himself, looking at each other, wondering why he wasn't answering the telephone.

The bell abruptly ceased to ring. The sudden silence in the room pressed down on him. Carefully, he stepped away from the broken pieces of glass. He must get out of the house, he told himself. He couldn't stay here a minute longer. Later, he would come back, but right now, until his nerves settled, he must get out.

He went quickly up the stairs, took off his shorts and had a shower. He put on a pair of trousers and a shirt that were lying on a chair, thus avoiding opening the closet. He checked his money and was dismayed to find he had only 500 piastres in his wallet. He rummaged among his handkerchiefs in a drawer in his closet and found another two piastres note.

This wasn't so good, he thought. He needed money. If he was going to get out of the country, he would have to have money. His mouth tightened when he remembered it was Sunday and the banks were closed. He would have to cash a cheque at one of the hotels. He was pretty well known now in Saigon. It surely wouldn't be difficult to get some hotel to cash his cheque.

As he was about to leave the room, he suddenly remembered he had

left the diamonds in the hip pocket of his shorts and this forgetfulness frightened him.

I must pull myself together he told himself as he took the envelope from the pocket of the shorts. I'm risking my neck for these stones and here I am, walking out without them.

He opened the envelope and examined the stones under the ceiling lamp. The sight of them sent a surge of excitement through him. He returned to the sitting room and searched in his desk drawer for something more solid to hold the diamonds. He decided on an empty typewriter ribbon box. He put the diamonds into the box, again pausing to admire them, then put the box in his trouser pocket. He found his cheque book which he put in his wallet, then he walked into the kitchen and looked across the courtyard through the slit in the shutter.

Dong Ham was squatting outside the cookhouse door, staring blankly towards him. There was no sign of the girl. Wondering where she had got to, Jaffe returned to the sitting room and looked through the shutters into the street beyond. He stiffened when he saw the girl squatting on the edge of the kerb opposite, looking towards the house.

These two obviously suspected something, he thought, but with the inevitable, dimwitted Asian patience they were waiting to see what happened. But at the same time, they were taking no chances. While the old man watched the back door, the girl was watching the front.

At this moment, he was past caring. He had to get away from the atmosphere of the house.

He took a last look around the room, then he picked up his car keys, the key of the back door and the newspaper parcel and went into the kitchen. He slid back the bolt, opened the back door and stepped into the stifling heat of the evening sun. Studiously ignoring Dong Ham, he locked the door and put the key in his pocket. As he passed the old man on his way to the garage, he said, without looking at him, "I'll be back late. No dinner."

He drove the red Dauphine which he had bought when he had first come to Saigon because of its ease of parking, down the short runway to the double gates. He stopped the car, got out and opened the gates, aware of the girl, staring intently at him.

He got into the car, and leaving the gates wide open, he drove fast towards the centre of the town.

II

Sam Wade (Second Secretary: Information. United States Embassy) parked his Chrysler car outside the Majestic Hotel, and heaved his bulk out on to the sidewalk. He paused to look across the road at the miniature golf course where two Vietnamese girls were playing with considerable skill watched by a large crowd of Sunday loafers.

He thought the two girls in their blue tunic sheaths and white silk trousers made an attractive picture. He never ceased to admire the Vietnamese girls. Their charms for him were as sharp edged as when he had first come to Saigon eighteen months ago.

Sam Wade was a squat, fat man, balding, with a red, good-natured face. He wasn't brilliant at his work, but he was well liked and known for his weakness for women and loud pattern Hawaii shirts.

Freshly shaved and showered, and basking in the glory of a new colourful shirt, Sam Wade felt on top of the world. He had spent the afternoon water skiing. In half an hour's time, he had a date with a Chinese girl with whom he had arranged to spend the night. So for Sam Wade, the world was revolving satisfactorily.

He entered the empty bar of the Majestic Hotel and lowered his bulk into a chair with a grunt of satisfaction.

The ceiling fans revolved lazily, stirring the hot, humid air. In a little while, the bar would become crowded but for the moment, Wade appreciated having the place to himself. He ordered a double whisky on the rocks, lit a cigar and stretched out his short fat legs.

After the inevitable delay the whisky was placed before him, and he savoured his first drink of the day.

Leaning back in his chair, he regarded the activity of the street outside with its traffic of cycle rickshaws, known in Saigon as *pousse-pousse*, the dangerously driven motor cycles and the stream of bicycles ridden by the Vietnamese. He spotted Jaffe's red Dauphine as it pulled out of the stream of traffic and edged its way to a standstill behind his Chrysler car.

Watching him, as Jaffe crossed the sidewalk and came into the bar, Wade thought he looked fine drawn and worried. He thought: looks as if he has something on his mind. Maybe he's got a touch of dysentery.

He raised a fat hand in greeting when he caught Jaffe's eye. He was puzzled to see the big, muscular man hesitate as if he were in two minds whether to join him or not. With an obvious effort, he came over, pulled out a chair and sat down.

"Hi, Steve," Wade said and smiled, "what'll you have?"

"A Scotch I guess," Jaffe said and fumbled for a cigarette. "That's a hell of a shirt you're wearing."

"Yeah, isn't it?" Wade smiled complacently. "It even scares me a little," and he laughed. He ordered a double Scotch and soda for Jaffe and paid for both drinks. "I didn't see you on the river this afternoon."

Jaffe shifted uneasily in his chair.

"No," he said in a cold, flat voice. "Have you been skiing?" He was telling himself it had been a mistake to come into the bar. He should have gone immediately to the desk, cashed his cheque and left. He should have remembered you always ran into someone you knew at the Majestic bar.

Wade said he had been skiing. He grumbled about the filth of the Saigon river while Jaffe only half listened.

Seeing he wasn't holding Jaffe's interest, Wade said, "I've got hold of a piece of Chinese tail for tonight," and he leered. "She's a real dish. I ran into her at L'Arc-en-Ciel the other night. If she performs the way she looks, I'm in for one hell of a night."

Looking at the fat, good natured man who lolled opposite him, Jaffe felt a sharp twinge of envy. He too expected to have a hell of a night, but horribly different from the one Wade was anticipating. In an hour or so, he would have to decide what he was going to do, and on that decision, his freedom and life depended.

"Apart from the girls and the Chinese food," Wade was saying, "this is a hell of a dump to live in. I'll be mighty glad when I go home. These goddam restrictions give me a pain in the pants."

Jaffe was staring past Wade out on to the street at the two Vietnamese policemen who lounged outside the hotel; small, brown skinned men

in white drill with peak caps and revolvers at their hips. The sight of them gave him a sickish feeling. He wondered how Wade would react if he told him he had murdered Haum and had hidden his body in his clothes closet.

"I see you're still running that little car," he heard Wade say and realized the fat man had been talking for some time and he hadn't been listening to what he had been saying. "Do you still like it?"

Jaffe dragged his mind away from his problem.

"It's all right," he said. "I'm having trouble with the automatic choke, but the car wasn't new when I bought it."

"Well, I guess it's handy for parking, but give me a big car," Wade said and glanced at his wristwatch. The time was three minutes to seven. He got to his feet. As he stood beside Jaffe, he wondered what was bothering the guy. He seemed so far away and unfriendly. This wasn't like Jaffe. Usually he was a good guy to drink with. "Are you okay, Steve?"

Jaffe looked up sharply. Wade had an uneasy idea he was suddenly scared.

"I'm all right," Jaffe said.

Wade frowned at him, then gave up.

"Watch out you're not sickening for a dose of dysentery," he said. "I've got to run along. I promised to feed my girlfriend before she performs. See you, pal."

As soon as Wade had driven away, Jaffe took out his cheque book and wrote out a cheque for 4,000 piastres.

He went over to the reception desk and asked the clerk if he would cash the cheque. The clerk, a pleasant-faced Vietnamese who knew Jaffe, asked him politely to wait. He disappeared into the Manager's office, reappeared in a moment or so, and smiling, handed Jaffe eight five hundred piastres notes.

Relieved, Jaffe thanked him and tucked the notes into his wallet. He left the hotel and drove up Tu-Do and parked outside the Caravelle Hotel. He entered and asked the reception clerk if he could cash him a cheque. Here again, the clerk knew him, and after a brief visit to the Manager's office, he cashed Jaffe's cheque for another 4,000 piastres.

As he was leaving the hotel, he paused abruptly in the entrance, feeling his heart give a violent kick against his side.

A policeman was standing by the red Dauphine, his back to Jaffe. He appeared to be examining the car.

A few hours ago such an occurrence would have merely irritated Jaffe and he would have gone to the policeman and asked him what he was looking at, but now the sight of the little man in his white uniform frightened Jaffe so badly he had to resist the urge to run.

He remained motionless, watching the policeman who moved slowly to the front of the car and looked at the number plate, then he slouched away, his thumbs hooked in his gun belt to pause a little further up the street to examine yet another car.

Jaffe drew in a sharp breath of relief. He went down the steps to his car, unlocked it and climbed in. He glanced at his wristwatch. The time was twenty-five minutes past seven. He drove back to the river, past the Club Nautique where he could see a number of people on the terrace having drinks before dinner, on towards the bridge that led to the docks. He pulled up by the little ornamental garden by the bridge, parked his car and went into the garden. At this hour it was deserted except for two Vietnamese who sat on a seat under a tree: a boy and a girl, their arms around each other.

Jaffe moved well away from them and sat in the shade. He lit a cigarette. Now was the time, he told himself, to decide what he was to do. He had a certain amount of money. He had to get out of Vietnam. He couldn't hope to do this without help. He considered for a moment a quick dash to the frontier in the hope he could get to Phnom-Penh where he was certain to get a plane to Hong Kong, but the risk and difficulties were too great. If it weren't for the diamonds, he would have been prepared to take the risk, but it would be stupid, he told himself, now that he had a potential fortune in his pocket to go off at half-cock. He was sure that somehow, given the right contacts, it would be possible to get new identity papers and an exit visa. He would have to change his appearance of course. That shouldn't be difficult. He could grow a moustache, bleach his hair, wear glasses.

He had read often enough of people obtaining false passports. Exactly how this was done, he hadn't the faintest idea. It would probably be easier to get a faked passport in Hong Kong and have it brought to him here than it would to attempt to get it in Saigon.

He moved uneasily, flicking the ash off his cigarette.

Who could he approach to get him a false passport? He knew no one in Hong Kong. He couldn't think of anyone in Saigon either. Then he remembered Blackie Lee who ran the Paradise Club. He was a possibility, but was he to be trusted? Once the news broke that Haum had been murdered and the diamonds were missing would Blackie betray him? Even if Blackie was to be trusted, could he get a false passport? Had he contacts in Hong Kong?

Jaffe realized this business couldn't be rushed. It might take a couple of weeks before he had the slightest chance of getting out of the country. What was he going to do while he was waiting? Where could he stay where he wouldn't be found by the police?

By tomorrow morning, he felt sure, the hunt for him would be on. He had to get under cover tonight. But where?

The obvious person who would and could help him was Nhan, but Jaffe hesitated to involve her. He had no knowledge of the Vietnam Criminal Code, but he was sure anyone harbouring a murderer would get into trouble, and yet, if he didn't involve her who else could he turn to? He was wasting time, he told himself. He would have to rely on her: he would see and talk to her. He couldn't stay at her place. He had never been there but she had often described it to him. She lived in a three-room apartment with her mother, her uncle and her three brothers. She often complained sadly of her lack of privacy, but maybe she knew of someone: maybe she would have some ideas.

He got to his feet and walked over to his car. The boy and girl sitting on the seat didn't look his way. They were too wrapped up in each other to be aware even that he was there. Looking at them, so obviously happy in their secure, safe dreams, Jaffe suddenly felt more lonely than he had ever felt before in his life.

chapter three

I

On the way up the Boulevard Tran Hung, Jaffe was boxed in on either side by motor cycles, pousse-pousse, enormous American cars driven recklessly by rich Vietnamese and small taxis driven with equal recklessness by amateur taxi drivers who had no idea where they were going, but were quite happy so long as they kept their cars in motion.

For the unwary, the boulevard was full of menace. The multicoloured Chinese signs were dazzling. The older generation of the Vietnamese residents, dressed entirely in black, refused to walk on the sidewalks and marched steadily in the road. It was only when your headlights picked them out, a few yards ahead of you, you realized you were on the point of running them down. Quick braking meant the chance of another car slamming into your rear.

As you approached Cholon, the Chinese district, the street narrowed. The vast, loitering population spilled off the pavements and into the street, offering suicidal hostages to fortune.

Jaffe had been driving in this district for months and he had no difficulty in weaving his car through the congested traffic and avoiding the wandering pedestrians. The distraction of driving took his mind off his immediate problems.

Finally, and not without some difficulty, he managed to park his car within a hundred yards of the Paradise Club. He waved aside three ragged Chinese children who had rushed up to open his car door and help him wind up the windows in the hope of earning a piastre or two, then he walked down the narrow, stifling street, brilliantly lit by Chinese neon signs to the entrance to the Paradise Club.

As he climbed the stairs that led to the club, he heard the Philippine dance band blasting and a girl screeching: the music and her voice trebly magnified by microphones to a nerve shattering volume that delights the Chinese who believe the louder the sound the better the music. Jaffe lifted aside the curtain that screened the entrance to the dance hall. Immediately a tall Chinese girl her face whitened by

powder, her figure under a white Cheongsam provocative, came tip to him. She was Blackie Lee's wife, Yu-lan, and as soon as she recognized Jaffe she smiled at him.

"Khan hasn't come yet," she said, caressing his arm with her slim fingers. "She will be here very soon."

Her welcome relaxed Jaffe. He went with her into the dance hall. The place was crowded, but the lighting was so dim it was impossible to see more than a crowd of silhouetted heads outlined against the light from the band's dais.

She led him to a table, away from the band, and in a corner. She pulled out a chair for him.

"Tu va bien?" she asked, smiling at him. She always tu-toied him.

"Ca va," he said and sat down. "Blackie around? I'll have a Scotch on the rocks."

"Toute de suite," she said, and he was aware she looked quickly at him and he realized he had spoken more sharply than he had intended.

She went away and he sat there, his mind dulled by the violent sound of the dance music and the impact of the woman singing into the microphone. The power of her lungs was shattering to Western nerves.

With scarcely any delay, Blackie Lee appeared out of the shadows and eased his fat body gently on to the chair next to Jaffe's.

Blackie Lee was a squat shaped man of thirty-six with broad shoulders, black oiled hair, parted in the middle and a broad yellow face that at any crisis remained expressionless.

One shrewd glance at Jaffe told Blackie that something was wrong. His alert mind quickened to attention. He liked Jaffe. He was a free spender, a non-trouble maker, and it was good for Blackie's business to have non-trouble making Americans for clients.

"What contacts have you in Hong Kong?" Jaffe asked abruptly.

Blackie's face remained expressionless and sleepy-looking.

"Hong Kong? I have many friends in Hong Kong," he said. "What kind of contacts do you mean?"

Jaffe felt like a man standing on the edge of a swimming pool, preparing to dive in. Could he trust this fat Chinese? he asked himself and hesitated.

Seeing him hesitate, Blackie said encouragingly, "Besides my many friends, my brother also lives in Hong Kong." There was another long pause while Blackie probed his teeth with a gold toothpick and Jaffe stared out across the crowded dance floor while he tried to make up his mind whether to trust Blackie or not.

Finally, he said, "A situation has arisen: it's tricky and strictly confidential. A friend of mine may need a false passport."

Blackie gave an imperceptible start but enough to puncture his gum with the sharp point of the toothpick.

"A passport?" he repeated as if he had never heard of the word.

"I guess it would be easier to get a passport in Hong Kong than here," Jaffe said, trying to speak casually. "I was wondering if you knew someone who could get it."

"An American passport?"

"A British passport would be better."

"It is an illegal and dangerous business meddling with passports," Blackie said softly. He was frankly worried. He didn't believe Jaffe's friend existed. This big man wanted a British passport for himself. Why? Obviously he planned to leave Vietnam, but why a false passport?

"I know all that," Jaffe said impatiently. "Have you any contacts who could get me a British passport?"

"For your friend?" Blackie asked.

"That's what I said. He'll be willing to pay for it."

"If it could be arranged it would be expensive," Blackie said.

"But can it be arranged?"

Blackie put his toothpick into his shirt pocket.

"It is possible. I would have to make inquiries. It would cost a lot of money."

"It's urgent," Jaffe said. "How soon could you know?"

"I would have to write to my brother. As you know letters are often censored here. I would have to find someone I could trust to take the letter personally to my brother. He would have to find someone to bring his reply personally to me. This would take time."

Jaffe suddenly realized how difficult it was all going to be. His estimate of ten days before he could get away suddenly seemed ridiculously optimistic. He might have to remain in hiding for a month; even longer.

Blackie went on, "Your friend is in trouble I suppose?"

"Never mind the details," Jaffe said curtly. "The less you know about it, the safer for you."

"That isn't entirely correct. If it is very serious trouble and it is discovered I had something to do with it, I could also get into trouble," Blackie said quietly. "It is unwise to walk into something you don't know about. Besides, if the trouble was very bad, it would effect the cost of the passport. Naturally, your friend would have to pay more."

Out of sight, under the table, Jaffe's big hands turned into fists. Goddam it! he thought, this is going to be a hell of a complicated thing! As soon as he reads the paper tomorrow, he'll know I'm up against a murder rap. He'll either be too scared to help or he'll jack up the price to some hopeless figure. Then he remembered he had the diamonds. He could pay for the passport with a diamond or two, but if he did that, he would be tipping Blackie off he had the stones. That could be dangerous. If Blackie once discovered he had General Nguyen Van Tho's diamonds, he might be tempted to steal them. He would have to be very careful. He was rushing into this without thinking the thing out.

"I'll have to talk to my friend again," he said, not looking at Blackie. "I would have to get his permission before I could tell you more about this business."

"That I understand," Blackie said. "A good friend doesn't betray confidences recklessly."

Jaffe looked sharply at him, but the fat yellow face told him nothing. Jaffe thought: he's no fool. He guesses the passport is for me. Should I admit it? He'll certainly know when he reads the papers tomorrow.

Better not. I've still got a little free time. I better talk to Nhan first.

"I suppose your friend wants to leave the country?" Blackie said mildly. "He must know it is a very complicated business. The passport to be of any use would first have to have an entrance visa stamp and then an exit visa stamp would have to be obtained. There would have to be photographs of your friend for the Immigration authorities. It would be necessary to bribe a number of people. This can, of course, be arranged, but not if the trouble is serious. For instance if your friend is in trouble with the police for issuing bad cheques or for molesting some girl or for taking something that doesn't belong to him or for running someone over, then it could be arranged, but if it is a political or a capital crime your friend has committed, then it could not be arranged."

Well, that's that! Jaffe thought and he felt a restriction around his throat.

"I'll talk to him," he said and Blackie recognizing the finality in his voice, got to his feet.

"You can, of course, rely on me to help where I can," he said, "but naturally I must avoid any trouble."

"That's okay," Jaffe said. "I understand."

When Blackie had gone away, Jaffe looked at his watch. The time was half past nine. It was unlikely Nhan would arrive before ten-thirty. He suddenly realized he was hungry.

He pushed back his chair, got to his feet and moved around the dance floor to the exit.

Across the street, was a Chinese restaurant where he often ate. He went in, nodding to the proprietor who was flicking the beads of his calculator with that incredible swiftness that made the whole operation a complete mystery to any European mind. He paused, bobbed his head and revealed big yellow teeth in a smile.

A Chinese girl, wearing what looked like an air hostess's uniform, led Jaffe behind screens to a single table.

Every table in this restaurant was hidden by screens from which came the raucous sound of Chinese laughter and the clatter of numerous dishes.

Jaffe ordered Chinese soup, sweet sour pork and fried rice. He wiped his face and hands on the hot towel offered to him by the girl who handed him the steaming towel in a pair of chromium tongs.

While waiting for the meal to be served, Jaffe considered his problem. He was nervous of Blackie in spite of his wife's assurance. He saw now that the problem of getting out of Vietnam would be even more complicated if he tried to buy a passport.

So what was he going to do? He felt sure that if he had enough ready cash, he would be able to get out of Vietnam. To get the necessary cash, he would have to sell some of the diamonds. But who would buy them in Saigon?

He was still brooding over this problem when the meal was served. He ate hungrily, washing the food down with warm Chinese wine. When he had finished, the girl gave him another hot towel and he wiped his hands, then asked for the bill.

The girl went away, leaving his screen half open. While he waited for the bill, he saw Sam Wade and a Chinese girl come out from behind a screen and move to the head of the stairs.

Jaffe studied the girl with Wade. She was tall, with an exceptional figure. She was wearing a scarlet Cheongsam that accentuated the curves of her figure. She was sophisticated and looked very bored and sharply aware of her physical attractions. Jaffe decided she wasn't the kind of woman who would appeal to him. She would be complicated. Comparing her to Nhan's simplicity, he was suddenly very thankful and grateful that he had been lucky enough to have found Nhan.

He waited until the two had disappeared down the stairs, then he paid his bill and went down into the street to find Nhan.

II

It was just on ten-thirty o'clock when Jaffe saw Nhan coming briskly along the sidewalk, weaving her way through the jostling crowd, a slightly worried expression on her delicately-featured face. She was wearing white silk trousers and a red wine-coloured tunic sheath.

Jaffe tapped his horn button three times, paused then tapped it again. It was their understood signal. She immediately looked in his direction and when she saw the red Dauphine her face lit up and she smiled. She started towards the car as Jaffe got out.

It is a damn funny thing, Jaffe thought as he stood by the car waiting for her, but every time I meet her, I get a real bang out of it.

Nhan ran up to him and looked up at him as he took her hand.

There was that extraordinary look of adoration in her dark eyes that always startled Jaffe. It was a look he had never seen in any other woman's eyes: it said plainly: you are the centre of my universe, without you there would be no sun, no moon, no stars, no nothing. It was a look of complete and candid love.

Although it flattered his ego to know she loved him so completely at the same time it often embarrassed him; knowing that he himself wasn't capable of loving her in the same way.

"Hello," Nhan said. "Are you feeling very fine?"

She was very proud of the fact that she was learning English. She could speak fairly fluent French, but since she had met Jaffe she was now concentrating on English.

"Hello," Jaffe said and felt a constriction in his throat as he looked down at her. Her doll-like features, her smallness, and her love moved him as nothing else could move him. "Yeah, I'm fine. Tell Blackie you won't be working tonight. I want to talk to you." He took out his wallet and gave her some money. "Here, give this to him, and hurry, will you?"

Her almond-shaped eyes widened as she looked at the money.

"But, Steve, why don't you come up? We can dance and talk. It'll save your money."

"Give it to him," Jaffe said curtly. "I can't talk to you up there."

She gave him a quick, puzzled stare, then went quickly up the stairs to the club.

Jaffe got into the Dauphine and lit a cigarette. In spite of the slight breeze, the heat oppressed him. Every now and then his mind would jump to Haum in the clothes closet. The thought of the dead man

made him flinch.

Nhan came out of the club and got into the car. As she slammed the door, Jaffe pressed the starter button and eased the car into the stream of *pousse-pousse* and cars.

He drove as fast as he could towards the river. Nhan sat silent, her hands resting on her knees, her eyes on the flow of traffic.

When they reached the ornamental gardens by the bridge, Jaffe stopped the car.

“Let’s get out,” he said, sliding out of the car.

She followed him over to the seat under the trees where the young Vietnamese couple had sat and they sat down. The moon floated in a cloudless sky, shedding its light on the sampans and the small rowing boats that still moved on the river.

As Nhan settled herself beside Jaffe, he put his arm around her slender body and kissed her. He held her against him, his mouth on hers for a long moment, then releasing her, he lit a cigarette, snapping the match into the river.

“What’s the matter, Steve?” She spoke in French now, and he was aware her expression was anxious.

He hesitated to admit anything was the matter, then realizing he was wasting time, he said, “Something’s happened. I’m in trouble. Don’t ask questions. It’s better that you don’t know. The point is I’m in bad trouble with the police. I have to get away.”

She went rigid, her hands gripping her silk-clad knees. He could hear her quick breathing. He watched her, pitying her. As she didn’t speak, he said, “It’s bad, Nhan. I’ve got to get out of the country somehow.”

She drew in a deep breath.

“I don’t understand,” she said. “Please explain this thing to me.”

“Something happened this afternoon. The police will be looking for me by tomorrow.”

“What happened?”

Jaffe hesitated, then decided to tell her. The newspapers were certain to carry the story tomorrow or the day after; then everyone would

know. So he told her.

Her fingers tightened on his wrist. "But it was an accident!" she said breathlessly. "You must tell the police! It was an accident!"

He moved impatiently.

"They'll think I killed him. Don't you understand? I've got to get out or I'm sunk!"

"But it was an accident!" she exclaimed. "You must go to the police at once! They will be pleased when you give them the diamonds. Let us go to the police now!" and she started to get up.

"I'm keeping the diamonds and I'm not going to the police," he said in a hard, cold voice.

She dropped back on to the seat. She lowered her head so he couldn't see her face.

"Don't you see?" he said angrily. "Once I get away, I can sell the diamonds. They are worth a million dollars — probably more. It's a chance in a lifetime. I've always wanted to get my hands on really big money!"

She rocked herself to and fro in her agony of fear.

"If you run away, they will think you killed him." She moaned. "You mustn't do it. No money is worth this. You must give them the diamonds!"

"I did kill him," he said, growing impatient. "I'm not such a fool as to risk a trial. They could put me in their stinking jail for years. We're wasting time. Somehow, I've got to get out. It'll take time to organize. I've got to find some safe place where I can hide. Do you know where I could hide?"

"Hide?" She lifted her head and stared at him, terror made her look ugly. The word sparked off a panic that was pitiful to see. "What about me? Are you going to leave me?"

"I didn't say anything about leaving you. When I go, you'll come with me."

"But I can't! They won't give me permission to leave. No Vietnamese can leave the country! Besides, what will happen to my mother, my

brothers, my uncle, if I did leave?"

Complications, Jaffe thought. Always complications.

"If you want to come with me, you'll have to leave them. But skip it : we'll solve that one when we have to. I must find some safe place to stay for a week or so. Do you know anyone I can go to? Not in Saigon: somewhere outside."

She went off into a panic again.

"But you mustn't hide! You must go to the police!"

She began to beg him in a torrent of hysterical words to give up the diamonds, to go to the police, to tell them the truth.

He let her run on for a minute or so, then abruptly he stood up.

She stopped speaking and watched him, terror making her eyes large and glistening in the moonlight.

"Okay, okay," he said harshly. "If you don't want to help me, then I'll find someone who will. I'm not going to the police and I'm not giving up the diamonds!"

She shuddered and closed her eyes.

He felt sorry for her, but at the same time irritated and impatient. She was wasting precious time.

"I shouldn't have told you about this," he went on. "Come on: I'll drive you back to the club. You mustn't think any more about it. I'll find someone else to help me."

She jumped up and throwing her arms around his neck, pressing her slim figure against him, she clung frantically to him.

"I will help you!" she said wildly. "I'll come with you when you leave! I'll do anything you want!"

"Okay, now relax. Sit down. If someone sees us . . ."

She instantly released him and sat down. She was shaking and tears were running down her face. He sat by her side, not touching her and waited. After a while, she controlled herself and she timidly put her hand in his.

She said suddenly, "My grandfather has a house in Thudaumot. You would be safe there. I think I could persuade him to have you."

Jaffe drew in a long deep breath. He put his arm around her and hugged her.

"I knew you could help me," he said. "I was relying on you. It's going to be all right. In three or four months you and I will be in Hong Kong: we'll be rich."

She leaned against him, clutching his hand. He could feel she was still shaking

"I'll buy you a mink coat," he said. "That's the first thing we'll buy, and pearls. You'll look lovely in mink. You can have a car too: a car of your own."

"It will be very difficult for you to leave Vietnam," she said. "There are many restrictions and regulations."

He was irritated that she hadn't reacted to the dream he had tried to create for her. Mink, pearls and a car! She should have been excited at such a prospect, but instead she was underlining the one problem he had no idea how to solve.

"First things first," he said. "Let's go and talk to your grandfather. I will pay him well. You mustn't tell him about the police. It would be better to say I have a political enemy who is looking for me."

"I will tell him the truth," Nhan said simply. "When he knows I love you, he will help you."

Jaffe shrugged.

"Well, all right. I'll leave it to you, but be sure he doesn't rush off to the police."

"He would never do anything to make me unhappy," Nhan said with so much hurt dignity that Jaffe felt slightly ashamed. "I can persuade him to help you."

Jaffe suddenly saw the snag in this plan.

Thudaumot was twenty-two kilometres outside Saigon. He remembered there was a police post on the road and all cars had to stop at the post for a police check. It would be fatal to his plans if his

car was checked. When the police found Haum's body, they would check up on his car. As soon as they learned he had passed along the Thudaumot road, they would concentrate their hunt for him there.

"There's a police post on that road," he said. "This could be difficult."

Nhan stared at him, remaining motionless, waiting while he concentrated on a solution to this snag.

He realized after a moment's thought that his only hope of passing through the police post was to use another car and not his own. He did know cars with C.D. plates were rarely stopped at the police posts, and he immediately thought of Sam Wade and his big Chrysler car. If he could borrow the Chrysler he stood a good chance of covering his tracks.

From what Wade had said, he wouldn't be using the car tonight, but where was he? He knew he was holed up somewhere with the Chinese girl, but how could he find him?

He asked Nhan if she knew the girl and he described her.

"Yes, I know her," Nhan said, puzzled. "She dances at L'Arc-en-Ciel. Her name is Ann Fai Wah. She makes a lot of money going with Americans. She isn't a good girl."

"Do you know where she lives?"

Nhan thought for a moment then she said she had an idea the girl had an apartment off Hong Thap Tu.

Jaffe got to his feet. "Let's go," he said.

She stared blankly up at him. "You want to see Ann Fai Wah?" she asked indignantly. "Why? I will not go with you to that woman."

"Come on, come on," Jaffe said impatiently. "I'll explain on the way."

As he drove to the centre of the town, he explained about Wade's car.

"You'll have to drive it back, Nhan. Do you think you can manage?"

He had taught her to drive the Dauphine and she handled the small car very well, but he had no idea if she could cope with the big Chrysler.

She said firmly and with confidence that she would be able to drive

the Chrysler.

They found the big car parked outside a block of luxury flats down a quiet, tree-lined road.

Jaffe told Nhan to wait in the Dauphine and he went over to the Chrysler. As he expected the doors were firmly locked and the windows up. He would have to get the keys from Wade and get his permission to use the car. He hoped Wade wasn't already in the sack with the Chinese girl.

He entered the block and learned from the indicator board the girl's apartment was on the fourth floor. He went up in the lift and as he paused outside her front door he glanced at his watch. The time was ten minutes past eleven.

He listened and thought he could hear faint dance music. He thumbed the bell and waited. There was a long pause, then he rang the bell again.

The front door opened on a chain and the Chinese girl looked inquiringly at him. He saw with relief that she was fully dressed. He smiled at her.

"Sorry to intrude, but I want to speak to Sam," he said. "It's urgent."

He heard Wade, somewhere out of sight, say, "What the hell? Here, get out of the way, baby."

The door pushed to, the chain was released and Wade appeared in the doorway, scowling.

The girl, with an elaborate shrug of her shoulders, went into the inner room and closed the door.

Wade looked a little drunk. He glared blearily at Jaffe.

"What the hell do you want?" he demanded. "How did you know I was here?"

"You told me — remember?" Jaffe said. "Sorry to bust in like this but I'm in a fix. Look, my damn car's broken down. I've got a girl waiting and I've got to cart her out to the airport. Can I borrow your car? I'll put it right back in a couple of hours."

"Why the hell don't you take a taxi?"

Jaffe gave him a sly grin.

“You don’t and can’t do what I intend to do to this girl in a taxi, brother. Come on, be a sport or she’ll change her mind. I’d do the same for you.”

Wade suddenly relaxed and matching Jaffe’s grin, he fished out his car keys.

“You old sonofabitch,” he said. “Who is she? Anyone I know?”

“I don’t think so, but if she’s any good, I’ll introduce you. That’s the least I can do.”

You do that and take care of my car. I want it back here by seven tomorrow morning.”

“Thanks, Sam, you’re a real pal.” Jaffe took the keys. “Okay in there?” He nodded towards the closed door of the inner room.

“Looks all set,” Wade said, lowering his voice. “We’ve got to the dancing stage. Another hour should see me approaching the home base.”

“Good luck and thanks again,” Jaffe said and moved to the lift.

“Same to you,” Wade said, “and don’t forget that introduction.”

He watched Jaffe descend out of sight in the lift, then he stepped back into the apartment and closed the door.

chapter four

I

As Jaffe walked over to the Dauphine, Nhan looked anxiously at him through the open car window. "It's okay," he said. "I've got the keys. Come on. We'll leave my car right here." She got out of the Dauphine and stood by his side while he wound up the windows and locked the door.

"You'll have to bring the Chrysler back here," he said, putting his hand on her arm and hurrying her across the road to Wade's car. "Do you think you'll be able to find your way back here on your own?"

"Yes."

"Good girl. It's a dead easy car to drive."

He opened the door of the Chrysler and she slid across the bench seat to the far side and he got in under the steering wheel. He put the key in the ignition and explained to her how to start the car.

"There's nothing to it. The gears are automatic. You just shift this lever to drive, take off the brake and give her gas."

He moved the car from the kerb and started slowly down the road.

"I'm going to drive past my place," he told her. "Keep a look out on your side. If that girl's gone, I want to get some clothes. I don't know how long it'll be before I can get away. I must have a change."

She didn't say anything. She sat as if she were stunned. He looked sharply at her. Her face was a blank mask of misery.

"Did you hear what I said?" he said sharply. "I'm relying on you, Nhan. If I'm going to get out of this mess, neither of us can make mistakes."

"I understand," she whispered.

It took a few minutes to reach the street where he lived. As he turned

into the dimly-lit, tree-lined street, he said, "Watch out! You look right. I'll look left. She's wearing white."

As he passed his small villa, he saw the place was in darkness. He could see no sign of anyone.

"Okay?" he asked, slowing down.

"I saw no one."

He swung the car into a side street and pulled up.

"Wait here," he said. "I'll walk back and have another look. If it's still okay, I'll go in and pack a bag. I won't be longer than ten minutes. Just wait here."

He set off back to the corner where he paused to look down the long deserted street. Then walking quickly, aware that his heart was beginning to thump, he advanced towards his villa.

He thought: this may be a stupid move. I could be walking into a trap. For all I know, that girl has called the police and they've found Haum and are waiting for me. But I've got to have a change of clothes and my shaving kit. I just don't know how long I'll be holed up in Thudaumot.

As he approached his villa, he looked searchingly for the girl or Dong Ham, but the street was empty. He paused at the gates and again looked to right and left. Then he gently lifted the latch, pushed open the gate entered and closed the gate behind him. He walked silently up the drive and to the back of the villa. Here he paused, keeping in the shadows and looked across the courtyard to the servants' quarters. No light showed. The door to the cookhouse was closed.

He thought: they've got fed up with waiting. She's gone home, and he's gone to bed.

He returned to the front door. Taking out his key, he unlocked the door and stepped into the stuffy darkness. He shut and locked the door, then paused to listen. There came "no sound to alarm him, and without turning on the light, he groped his way up the stairs and to his bedroom. The door was locked as he had left it. He inserted the key, pushed open the door and paused to listen. The cold air from the air-conditioner came out and greeted him, cooling his sweating face. He entered the room, shut the door and turned on the light. The room was exactly as he had left it, and he grinned sheepishly as he realized

how frightened he had been on the way up the dark stairs.

He looked at the clothes closet. His clothes were in there and so was Haum. This was no time to be squeamish. The quicker he got out of the villa and back to the Chrysler, the better.

He took a leather and canvas holdall from the top of the closet and tossed it on the bed. Then he went into the bathroom, collected his toilet kit, soap and two towels which he put in the holdall. From his chest of drawers, he took handkerchiefs, socks and three shirts. As he picked the shirts out of the drawer, he saw the gun. He looked at it for a long moment, startled.

He had bought this gun from a newspaper man who had been in Saigon during the early air raids. He had told Jaffe he had taken the gun from a soldier who had been killed by bomb blast.

“I’m going home now,” the “newspaper man said. “ You never know in this place. A gun can come in very handy. You can have it for twenty bucks.”

Jaffe had bought it. He had never anticipated having to use it, but at that time hand grenades were still occasionally being thrown and everyone was still pretty jumpy and it seemed the sensible thing to do to buy the gun.

He picked up the gun and balanced it in his hand. It was loaded, but he had no idea if it would be in working order after all this time. He was suddenly glad he owned the gun. In the spot he was now in, a gun might be very useful. He put it in the holdall, then with a conscious effort, he went over to the clothes closet, took out the key and unlocked the door.

He kept his eyes up so he didn’t see Haum on the floor, but he was aware of the faint but unmistakable smell of death, and he felt slightly sick.

Hurriedly, he grabbed from the clothes rack a dark tropical suit, khaki drill trousers and a khaki drill coat-shirt. He shut the closet door and locked it.

He folded the clothes and put them in the holdall. He was now ready to leave. He picked up the holdall and left the room, turning off the light. He paused to lock the door, then he groped his way into the darkness.

The contrast between his cold bedroom and the oven-heat of the hall brought him out into a violent sweat. He suddenly needed a drink and that reminded him he had a bottle of Scotch which might come in useful.

He entered the sitting room and turned on the light. It was while he was putting the nearly-full bottle of whisky into the holdall, after a quick drink, he became aware of the sound of voices in the street.

Hastily zipping up the holdall, he stepped to the window and peered through the shutters. What he saw gave him a paralysing shock.

Under the dim light of the street lamp, standing close together and looking at the villa, was Haum's fiancée and a policeman.

The girl was pointing to the sitting room window and Jaffe realized they could see the light coming through the shutters. The girl was talking excitedly, making chopping movements with her left hand while she continued to point with her right.

The policeman slouched at her side, his thumbs hooked into his gun belt, looking from her to the villa and back to her again.

Jaffe watched them, his heart now pounding violently. For some minutes the girl continued to talk, but Jaffe, watching the policeman, realized she wasn't making any headway. This wasn't surprising, Jaffe thought, slightly relaxing. She was urging this little man to enter property belonging to an American and the policeman was thinking this could spark off an international incident with him on the receiving end of trouble.

Suddenly the policeman turned on the girl and began to jabber fiercely at her. Jaffe could hear his harsh voice raised in anger, but he had no idea what he was saying.

His words, however, had a startling effect on the girl. She cowered away from the policeman and by her gestures, Jaffe guessed she was trying to excuse herself. The policeman continued to berate her until with a further outburst of words, he motioned her violently to go away.

She looked once more at the villa, then turning, she began to walk reluctantly down the street while the policeman, nibbling at his chinstrap, glared after her.

Jaffe drew in a long breath of relief. He watched the policeman pull

out his notebook and begin to write laboriously in the book. Having completed his notes, the policeman stood on the edge of the kerb and stared at the villa.

Jaffe wondered what Nhan was doing. He had now been gone over twenty minutes. He hoped she wouldn't panic and show herself. How long was this goddam monkey going to stand staring? Suppose he walked up the street, spotted the taillights of the Chrysler and poked his head into the car? He would give Nhan such a scare, she would probably have hysterics, and he would guess something was wrong.

Jaffe was just wondering if he should slip out the back way, climb the wall and get to Nhan through his neighbour's garden when the policeman seemed to lose interest in the villa, and turning, he slouched off down the street, following the direction of the girl and going away from the Chrysler.

Jaffe snatched up the holdall, turned off the light and let himself out into the dark garden. He locked the front door, then went cautiously to the gate and looked down the road. He could just make out the white figure of the policeman still moving away from him, and opening the gate, he ran silently to the Chrysler.

Nhan was standing in a tense attitude beside the Chrysler, looking towards him as he rounded the corner. He waved her back into the car, but she waited until he reached her.

"It's okay," he said, tossing the holdall into the back of the car. "Sorry I was so long. Come on, get in. We've got to get moving."

"I thought something terrible had happened to you," she said in a quavering voice as he hustled her into the car. "Oh, Steve! I'm frightened! If only you would go to the police! I'm sure . . ."

"Don't start that again!" he said as he started the car. "I know what you're doing. I've got to get out of Vietnam!" He drove fast down the street, heading out of town. "Do you think I can trust Blackie Lee to help me? You know him better than I do. Would he be likely to give me away to the police?"

She wrung her hands.

"I don't know. I don't know anything about him!"

Exasperated, he thought: why should she know anything about anything that could possibly help me? She's just a beautiful brainless

doll! Damn it! I might just as well ask advice from a child!

Immediately he realized the injustice of this. Wasn't she taking him to a hiding place and wasn't she returning Wade's car? Without her he would be in a hell of a fix.

He put his hand down on hers and patted it.

"Relax, kid. It'll work out all right. In a couple of months when we are in Hong Kong, we'll be laughing about it."

"Oh no! We'll never laugh about it. Never!"

He shrugged his shoulders. She was probably right, he thought but he wished she didn't sound as if the end of the world was at hand.

"There's one important thing you have to watch out for, Nhan. When the news breaks, Blackie will remember you spent this night with me. He'll probably question you. There's just a chance even the police will question you. You are to say I drove you to the river and talked to you for a couple of hours. You know that place where we go sometimes: where that old sunken junk is? That's where we went. I drove you home around eleven and left you. Will you remember that? It's a story they can't check."

She nodded. She was twisting a rag of a handkerchief in her fingers, and glancing at her, Jaffe thought despairingly: she will make a hopeless liar. No one will believe her.

"For God's sake, Nhan, don't let them trap you into telling them where I shall be hiding," he said roughly.

"I'll never tell anyone! Never!" She stiffened and spoke fiercely. "No one will ever make me tell!"

"And another thing; you mustn't tell anyone about the diamonds; not even your grandfather. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

"You're sure your grandfather will help me?"

"He is wise and kind and he would never do anything to make me unhappy," she said proudly. "When I tell him we love each other, he will help you."

Jaffe thought irritably: if he's all that wise, he'll guess you're my

mistress and he'll probably hate my guts and run to the police.

As if reading his thoughts, she said quietly, "It will be necessary to explain to him that shortly we are going to be married. When we arrive in Hong Kong, it is better for us to be married, don't you think, Steve?" This rather jarred Jaffe. He had never seriously thought of marriage after his first unhappy experience. He had been perfectly content to have Nhan as a mistress, but it had never occurred to him to marry her. Once he had sold the diamonds, he would be rich and he would be returning to America; a Vietnamese taxi dancer could be a hell of a hindrance in America, especially if she were his wife, but there was time to think about that: damn it! He wasn't in Hong Kong yet! He hadn't sold the diamonds yet!

But he realized it might be fatal to his plans if her grandfather wasn't told they were going to be married so he said lightly, "That's right, Nhan. You tell him that, but I want to explain to him personally the trouble I'm in. You just tell him I want shelter. I'll explain why. Do you understand?"

"Yes." She leaned against him, resting her small head on his shoulder. "I'm not so frightened now. Perhaps after all it will be all right."

She remained silent as if lost in a dream while Jaffe uneasy with his conscience, drove along the winding road where the rice fields, the odd thatched farmhouse on stilts and the occasional buffalo wallowing in swamp mud appeared and disappeared in the fast moving headlights of the Chrysler.

II

Four days previous to Jaffe's discovery of the diamonds, three peasants, dressed in their working black with grimy rags tied around their heads as protection against the sun, squatted in a semi-circle before a little brown man, wearing khaki shorts and shirt who sat on the stump of a tree and talked earnestly to them.

This man had come silently out of the forest and had entered the screened patch of ground where the young rice seedlings were sheltered from the wind. The three peasants who were working there had joined him immediately with a mixture of fear and excitement.

They had seen him several times before. He was the leader of a guerrilla band of Viet Minh communists whose work was to spread alarm and despondency among the Vietnam farming community. Whenever he appeared, these three peasants, Ho Chi Minh sympathizers and indoctrined with a hatred for the Vietnam regime, knew he had a job for them.

The little brown man told them it had been decided to stage a demonstration of power as close to the Vietnam capital as possible. No undue risks were to be taken and as few lives as possible should be lost. This was a demonstration, not an operation, but it was necessary to shake the authorities in Saigon out of their complacency, and this could only be done if the demonstration was staged alarmingly close to the capital. The farm of the three peasants was situated in a rice field a half mile from the Saigon-Bien Hoa highway. The little brown man reminded them that they were conveniently placed to make an attack on the police post at the Bien Hoa — Thudaumot road junction.

This police post was to be destroyed and with it the three policemen who guarded the post. The demonstration was to take place on Sunday night at fifteen minutes past twelve. The day and time had been selected to ensure no passersby nor vehicles would suffer.

The three peasants, he went on, must work out for themselves how the job was to be done. It was a perfectly simple demonstration, but they were to remember the timing was important.

When he had disappeared once more into the forest, after eating a bowl of rice with them, he left behind him a string bag containing six hand grenades.

It so happened that Jaffe, driving the Chrysler, approached the police post a few minutes before the attack was due to take place.

The three peasants lying in a ditch within fifteen yards of the police post saw his approaching headlights and looked blankly at each other: uncertain what to do. They had been lying in the damp ditch for over half an hour, and this was the first car they had seen on the road.

The three policemen, playing a form of Fan Tan with matches, also saw the approaching headlights and immediately got to their feet. While one of them swept up the matches, the other two snatched up their rifles.

The senior member of the three stepped into the road and began to flash a torch fitted with a red lamp.

Seeing the red light flashing some two hundred yards ahead of him, Jaffe slowed down, cursing under his breath. He hadn't expected to be stopped. He had hoped he would have been able to drive past the police post, the C.D. plates giving him immunity, but it now looked as if he would have to stop.

Questions would be asked if the police saw he had had a Vietnamese passenger and to avoid complications, he told Nhan to squat on the floor.

He reached over the back seat and pulled his holdall on top of her, screening her from sight. He was rattled, and without considering the consequences, he took the gun from the holdall and pushed it under his thigh nearest the door.

By now, the car was barely moving. The powerful headlights lit up the policeman who was pointing his rifle at the car.

As Jaffe pulled up, the luminous hands of the cheap watch being studied by one of the hidden peasants showed exactly fifteen minutes past twelve..

The other two policemen came out of the post and separated: one standing at the head of the car, the other at the tail. Both of them levelled their rifles at Jaffe who could feel the sweat running down his face and hear the heavy thud of his heartbeats.

As the policeman with the torch began to move towards Jaffe, one of the hidden peasants with an indifferent shrug of his shoulders, pulled the pin from the grenade he was holding and lobbed it through the open window of the police post.

He had been told to make the attack at exactly twelve-fifteen, and no one now could accuse him of disobeying an order.

The grenade dropped on to the table at which the three policemen had been gambling and exploded. It went off with a blinding flash and a bang that woke many of the farm workers, sleeping in their thatched huts in the neighbourhood.

A fragment of the grenade sliced into the neck of the policeman with the torch, cutting his jugular vein. The force of the explosion sent another of the policemen reeling against the shattered wall of the post. It also splintered the windshield of the Chrysler and knocked Jaffe half silly.

The remaining policeman at the rear of the car, although shaken, threw himself face down in the road and began to crawl under the car.

One of the peasants seeing this move, rolled his grenade along the road and into the policeman's face. The grenade blew the policeman's head from his shoulders and shrapnel tore the back tyres of the Chrysler to ribbons.

The third grenade was lobbed into the police post, killing the third policeman who had darted in there for cover and completed the destruction of the jerry-built building. Stunned and bleeding from a cut in his forehead from a flying stone, Jaffe sagged in his seat, too dazed to realize what had happened.

The three peasants had risen cautiously, from their hiding place and were surveying the scene in the bright moonlight with satisfaction mixed with apprehension. They were pleased to see the grenades had done their work so well, but it seemed that the European driver of this big American car had also suffered, and that would be a bad thing for them once the little brown man heard about it.

Motioning the other two to stay where they were, the peasant with the watch who was the leader of the band moved forward cautiously.

Jaffe saw a dark shape coming towards him. Keeping still, he eased the gun from under his thigh and as the peasant came within six feet of him, Jaffe lifted the gun and fired at him.

The .45 soft-nose bullet smashed into the peasant's face and he went over backwards like a shot rabbit. He lay in the glare of the car's headlights so that his two companions saw with horror the brains, bone and blood: all that was left of his head and face.

Jaffe had no idea if there were any more of them out there in the darkness and he crouched down in the car, peering just over the door.

One of the peasants pulled the pin from a grenade and was about to lob the grenade at the car when his companion grabbed his arm.

Unfortunately for them both, the one who had caught hold of the other was a slave to orders. He had been told to kill the three policemen but to avoid hurting anyone else. His instinctive reaction was to stop the other from throwing the grenade. His panic-stricken jerk on the other's arm caused the grenade to drop from his hand into the ditch where it exploded, riddling the two men with shrapnel and killing them.

Shrapnel flew over the top of the Chrysler and Jaffe ducked. He heard a soft moaning sound close to him and cursing, he swung his gun around only to remember that Nhan was by his side and it must be she who was moaning.

“Shut up!” he snarled at her. “There may be more of them out there!”

He waited for five painful minutes, then seeing and hearing nothing, he cautiously opened the car door and slid out onto the ground. He listened for several moments, then decided the danger was over and stood up surveying the scene.

He picked up the torch that was still alight and lying by the dead policeman and moving cautiously, he walked down the road until he came upon the two dead peasants. He made sure they were dead, then he came back.

“It’s all right,” he said shakily. “You can come out,” and he opened the off-side door and helped Nhan on to the road. He had to support her. She leaned heavily against him and she was shivering with terror. “Okay, okay,” he said impatiently. “It’s all right. Pull yourself together. We’ve got to get out of here.” But her legs weren’t able to support her, and when he released her, she slumped in the road.

Leaving her, Jaffe went over to the Chrysler and inspected the damage. When he saw the condition of the back tyres, he realized so far as he was concerned, the car was a complete write-off, and he cursed.

He was seventeen kilometres from Thudaumot and was now without transport. Although his head had stopped bleeding, it ached violently. He was badly shaken and shocked by the force of the exploding grenades. The thought of having to walk that distance made his heart sink.

But he knew they would have to leave immediately. Any moment someone might arrive to investigate. The sounds of the exploding grenades would have carried far in the quiet stillness of the night.

He went back to where Nhan was sitting in the road, holding her head between her hands, whimpering. He squatted down beside her.

“The car’s out of action,” he said. “We’ll have to walk. Come on, Nhan, pull yourself together. We’ve got to get going. Someone may come along any moment.”

He put his hand under her arm and hoisted her to her feet. She leaned against him, trembling.

“It’ll take us the best part of three hours to get to your grandfather,” he went on.

“There will be bicycles at the post,” she said, her voice quavering.

He stared at her: wondering why he hadn’t thought of that.

“Do you think so? I’ll see.”

He hurried over to the shattered police post. At the back he found three bicycles, lying in the long grass. He wheeled two of them onto the road. “That was a brainwave of yours. They’ll save us a hell of a walk. Do you feel like riding or would you like me to take you on the bar?” Moving shakily, she came over to him and took one of the machines.

“I’m all right.”

He felt a surge of love for her run through him. He thought: Damn it! She’s got guts! I’m a lucky sonofabitch to have her with me!”

“Well, let’s go,” he said, and collecting his holdall from the car, he swung his leg over the cycle.

He watched her mount her cycle, expecting her to fall off, but although she wobbled perilously for the first six or seven yards, she got the machine under control and seemed fairly steady.

He caught up with her and together they began to pedal down the road to Thudaumot.

“If we see any car coming,” he said to her, “we get off at once and lie in the ditch.”

She didn’t say anything. He could see by her strained expression, it was as much as she could do to ride the machine.

As they rode along, he switched his mind from her to his own problems,

He thought: I’m making a bad start. When Sam finds his car’s missing, he’ll charge around to my place. He said he wanted it by seven a.m. When he finds I’m not there at that hour, he’ll imagine I’ve had an accident. He’ll go to the police and tell them I borrowed the car to go

to the airport, but will he tell them I was with a girl?

He glanced at Nhan who was pedalling away, the split sheath of her tunic floating behind her.

The chances are, he went on thinking, the police will find the car before Sam knows it's missing. They'll get onto the Embassy. Hell! This is really going to start something. The Embassy will try to find Sam. They'll jump to the conclusion it was Sam driving the car. When he does turn up, maybe he'll have to tell the police he spent the night with that Chinese girl. He'll love that! How he'll curse me!

Then with a slight pang of regret, he realized it now didn't matter what Sam would think of him. He would probably never see Sam again if he had any luck. Then he had another thought that excited him.

When it's known I was in the car and the car's found, he reasoned, they'll all jump to the conclusion I've been kidnapped by the Viet Minh. It's the most obvious conclusion they could jump to.

He remembered two American tourists, some months ago, who had driven to Angkor and had never been heard of since. Their car had been found, but there had been no trace of them. The Vietnamese authorities had said they had been kidnapped by Viet Minh bandits and had regretfully told the Embassy there was nothing they could do about it.

Jaffe suddenly felt much more cheerful. This could mean the hunt for him would be very half-hearted. Once the Vietnam police had convinced themselves he was in the hands of the Viet Minh, they weren't likely to exert themselves, looking for him. They would put on a face-saving show for the benefit of the American Embassy, but it wouldn't last long. For the first time since he had found the diamonds, he felt quite light-hearted.

chapter five

I

Ann Fai Wah woke with a start and sat up abruptly in bed. She could hear the front doorbell ringing loudly and persistently.

She groped for the switch of the bedside lamp and turned on the light, looking at the travelling clock under the lamp as she did so. The time was twenty minutes to five.

Her almond-shaped eyes widened in alarm and she shook the fat sleeping form of Sam Wade, digging her long fingernails into the flesh of his arm.

Wade cursed sleepily, then raised his head and blinked at her.

“What’s the matter? What the hell . . .?”

Then he too heard the continuous ringing of the bell and he sat up, his mind suddenly awake and alarmed.

“What’s that?”

“Someone is ringing the front doorbell,” Ann Fai Wah said.

“That’s nothing to do with me,” Wade said, but the persistent and continuous sound of the bell was alarming him. Had this girl a lover or a husband? Was this the first move of the Badger game? He cursed himself for having spent the night with her. It had been a damn flop anyway: she had been as passionate and as active as a sack of rice.

“What’s the time?”

Ann Fai Wah told him as she slipped out of bed. She looked deceptively beautiful in her nakedness, but Wade was far too alarmed even to look at her.

“It will wake up the whole block,” she said as she put on a silk wrap. “Please come with me.”

“To hell with that,” Wade said. “You stay right where you are!”

But she had already crossed the room and, after a moment's hesitation, she disappeared into the sitting room.

Cursing, Wade scrambled out of bed and got into his trousers. He looked around wildly for something he could use for a weapon, but found nothing substantial enough. He was pulling on his shirt when the bell abruptly ceased ringing.

Tucking in his shirttails, he tiptoed to the bedroom door to listen.

He could hear a man's voice, then Ann Fai Wah said something, and there was a long pause.

Judas Priest! he thought, she's let the punk in!

He was dragging his shoes on as the bedroom door pushed open and Ann Fai Wah came in. Her face was frozen into an expression of such fury that Wade quailed.

"What is it?" he said thickly, backing away from her.

"It's the police!" she hissed at him and for a moment he thought she was going to scratch his eyes out. "They want you!"

He couldn't believe he had heard aright.

"The police?" he stammered, turning hot, then cold. "Me?"

With a furious gesture, she waved him to the door.

"Get out of here!"

The police! he thought. They can't pinch me for sleeping with a Chink, can they? I must have been out of my mind to have come here! There'll be an awful stink!

He went past her into the sitting room and she slammed the door after him. He expected to find the room full of white-uniformed policemen, but the one small man who was standing apologetically in the middle of the room came as a ridiculous anti-climax.

This man was very small and thin and shabbily dressed. His brown skinned face was typically Vietnamese. His black hair was cut in a bad imitation of a crew-cut. His shoes were dusty, his white shirt soiled and his wine-coloured tie frayed from constant knotting and re-knotting.

Wade stared at him as he ran his sweating hand over his dishevelled hair. He knew he must look pretty awful. He never did look much until he had had a shower and a shave.

“Mr. Wade?” the little man asked politely.

“Yeah,” Wade said. “Who are you? What do you want?”

“I am Inspector NgocLinh of Security police. Please excuse this visit. I would not have disturbed you, but the matter is very urgent.”

Security police! Wade thought. That jolted him. This could be serious. To cover up his agitation, he moved over to an occasional table and helped himself to one of Ann Fai Wah’s cigarettes.

“How the hell did you know I was here?” he demanded. The Inspector made an apologetic gesture.

“One of my men saw you last night with the Chinese woman. Having tried to find you at your house, I came here.”

Damn yellow spies! Wade thought. You can’t even blow your nose without them knowing!

“Well, what do you want?” he asked, glaring at the Inspector.

“Your car has been stolen.”

Wade felt a rush of blood to his head. He was suddenly so angry he could have taken the little man by his throat and thrown him out of the window.

“Do you mean you came here and woke me up to tell me that?” he bellowed. “Hell! I’ll report you, for this! “I’ll . . . I’ll . . .”

“The car has been found wrecked on the Bien Hoa road,” the Inspector said quietly.

“My car?” Wade stared stupidly at the Inspector. His rage oozed out of him like air out of a pricked balloon. “Wrecked?”

“That is so,” the Inspector said, his flat black eyes never leaving Wade’s face.

That damned Jaffe! Wade thought. Wrecking my car! I must have a hole in my head to have lent it to him!

“You’ve got it all wrong,” he said angrily. “The car wasn’t stolen. I lent it to a friend of mine. Where is the car? I’ll collect it sometime today.” Then a sudden thought struck him and he stiffened. “Was anyone hurt?”

“There was no one in the car,” the Inspector said. “It was abandoned.”

Well, for the love of Mike! Wade thought, lashing himself into another rage. The sonofabitch wrecks my car and then calmly walks off. He hadn’t even the decency to telephone me!

“I can’t do anything about it now,” he said. “Not at this hour. You don’t expect that, do you?”

“Who was the person you lent the car to, Mr. Wade?” Wade scowled at him.

“That’s none of your damned business. I lend my car to whoever I want.”

“There has been a bad accident and it hasn’t been reported. That is a serious offence, Mr. Wade.”

That was a fact, Wade thought. All members of the diplomatic corps had been repeatedly warned that any infringement of the traffic regulations unless reported could be a serious offence. He thought viciously: serves the punk right! Smashes my car and then walks off! They’ll chew his damn cars off!

“I lent it to Steve Jaffe,” and he gave Jaffe’s address.

“Thank you, Mr. Wade,” the Inspector said and wrote the address in his notebook. “I regret having to trouble you. I may have to trouble you again later. May I call at the Embassy?”

“Oh, sure,” Wade growled, “but not before half past ten, and don’t try to drag me into this! I just lent my car. If Jaffe was mug enough to have had an accident, you can’t blame the...”

“May I ask why you lent him your car, Mr. Wade?”

“Because his own car had broken down and he had to go to the airport.”

The black eyes staring so intently, flickered slightly.

“The airport? Are you sure about that, Mr. Wade?”

“That’s what he told me.”

“The accident took place on the Bien Hoa road. As you know it is the wrong direction for the airport.”

Wade moved impatiently.

“I’m telling you what he told me!” Was he with someone?”

Wade was quite sure it was no business of the Saigon police whether Jaffe had a girl with him or not. He was damned if he was going to give them any information not relating to the accident.

“He might have had a car full of Chinese coolies for all I know.”

Again the little black eyes flickered.

“Did he in fact have Chinese coolies with him, Mr. Wade?”

“I don’t know who he had with him and I don’t give a damn!”

“Then he did have someone with him?”

“I tell you I don’t know! I’ve had enough of this! I want to go back to bed!”

The Inspector bowed. “I understand. I’m sorry to have disturbed you. I will see you later in the day. Thank you for your assistance,” and turning he left the room.

When Wade heard the front door close, he drew in a long breath of relief. He turned to the bedroom to find Ann Fai Wah standing in the doorway, glaring at him.

“You bring the police to my home!” she said viciously. “Never will you come here again! Get out!”

“Who would want to come here again?” Wade snarled.

“Who are you kidding, you yellow fake?”

She began to scream abuse at him, half in Chinese, half in French, but Wade was too tired and angry to care. He pushed past her into the bedroom, collected his coat, and with her still screaming at him, he stamped out of the apartment.

When he reached the street, he realized he had to walk home. When

he finally reached home, he discovered Ann Fai Wah had stolen all his money from his wallet.

It certainly had been one hell of a night.

II

A police car pulled up outside Jaffe's villa and Inspector NgocLinh got out. He signed to the uniformed driver to remain where he was and then walked up the drive to the front door.

He didn't expect to find Jaffe there. He had already formed an opinion as to what had happened to the driver of the wrecked Chrysler, but he had to make sure.

The outrage at the police post had been discovered fifteen minutes after Jaffe and Nhan had ridden away.

Hearing the sound of the distant explosions, two policemen on road patrol had ridden fast to the post. Fortunately, they found the telephone was still working, and in less than twenty minutes, a number of Security police, including Inspector NgocLinh, had arrived on the scene.

Apart from the wrecked Chrysler, it seemed to be a typical Viet Minh demonstration although it was unusual for the bandits to leave any of their own dead behind in an attack of this kind.

The presence of the Chrysler baffled the Inspector, but now that he knew Wade had lent the car to Jaffe, he was satisfied that Jaffe was either dead or had been kidnapped.

He rang on the front doorbell and it didn't surprise him that there was no answer. He was turning away when he saw Dong Ham come around the side of the villa from the cookhouse.

He listened to the old man's anxious story with attention and interest.

This story intrigued the Inspector who could make neither head nor tail of it.

"And Mr. Jaffe?" he asked. "Did he go out?"

“He went out at six, taking his car.” Dong Ham said, his wrinkled face screwed up with alarm.”

The Inspector turned over in his mind what he had heard, but he still couldn't understand what it was all about.

“You have the key to the villa?” he asked finally.

Dong Ham handed him a key.

“You haven't been in there?”

“No. I am the cook. I have no business inside the villa.”

The Inspector balanced the key on the palm of his hand while he considered what to do. Entering property rented by an American could cause a diplomatic incident, but in view of what he had learned, he decided he was justified in seeing if the houseboy was in the villa or not.

He told Dong Ham to remain where he was, then walked around to the back door, unlocked it and entered the kitchen. He saw the stepladder leaning against the wall. He then entered the sitting room and looked around. Everything there seemed in order except a broken drinking glass and a damp patch that could be whisky on the floor.

He went into the hall, opened the front door and beckoned to Dong Ham who came up the steps reluctantly.

“Have you ever been in here before?” the Inspector asked.

Dong Ham said he had been in twice to help Haum move some furniture.

“Go in there and tell me if you see anything unusual in the room.”

Dong Ham entered the sitting room and looked around.

Immediately he pointed to the picture on the wall. That, he said, he hadn't seen before.

The Inspector examined the picture which didn't appeal to him. This would explain why Haum had fetched the ladder and the hammer. Having solved that little problem, the Inspector dismissed it from his mind and proceeded to look over the villa. He opened cupboards in the kitchen and in the sitting room, then finding nothing to interest him, he went upstairs, leaving Dong Ham in the hall.

A quick glance into the bathroom showed him everything was in order and he moved down the passage to Jaffe's bedroom. He found the door locked. It was unusual, he thought, frowning at the door, to lock a bedroom door and to remove the key. He tapped on the door and listened, but heard nothing. Then he stepped silently to the banister rail and looked down into the hall to make sure Dong Ham was still there, seeing he was, he took a pick-lock from his pocket and unlocked the bedroom door.

He entered the bedroom. The contrast of the stifling passage and the cold bedroom made him shiver slightly. He looked at the big clothes closet and his intent black eyes flickered. He tried the door and found it locked. Using the pick-lock, he opened the door.

Dong Ham waiting in the hall, nervously picking at the hard lump of skin on his hand, could hear the Inspector moving about upstairs. The old man watched anxiously. He was quite certain that something very bad had happened to Haum whom he liked.

It was a good half hour before Inspector NgocLinh came down the stairs. Dong Ham watched him come; he could read nothing from the brown, expressionless face.

"I will be returning," the Inspector said. "In the meantime no one is to enter the villa, and that includes you. Is that understood?"

Dong Ham nodded. He was too frightened to ask the question that was tormenting him.

The Inspector waved him out of the villa, then following him, he locked the back door. He called to the uniformed driver who got out of the car and hurried to his side.

"You will remain here and see no one enters the villa," the Inspector said. "You will let no one see you, unless of course, you have to prevent them entering. I may be two or three hours, but I will return."

Leaving the driver staring suspiciously at Dong Ham who blinked at him uneasily, the Inspector walked to the car and drove rapidly away.

III

Colonel On-dinh-Khuc, Chief of Security Police, sat in a high-back, heavily carved wooden chair and breathed gently through his wide spread nostrils.

He was a grossly built man with a round hairless head, narrow cruel eyes, thick lips and big flat pointed ears. Half Chinese, half Vietnamese, he had the worst features of both races, both in his nature and in his appearance.

For six years he had controlled Security Police with an iron hand, but there were certain influential politicians who were determined to get rid of him, and this he knew.

They argued that he had long since served his purpose. He had been useful before the regime had been finally established, but his methods were so grossly uncivilized and his mentality so brutal, he could now very easily bring the regime into international disrepute. The sooner he went and a more acceptable man found the better.

This campaign to get rid of him was steadily gaining ground. Colonel Khuc was a man of extravagant tastes and vices. Compulsory retirement was the only thing he feared., Once he was deprived of his office, the large income he extorted from thousands of peasants and Chinese coolies who had reason to fear the police would come to an end. He would have his pension to live on and nothing more. The thought of living at such a reduced scale continually tormented his mind.

This Monday morning, he had been awakened from an opium drugged sleep by a terrified servant who had been forced to do so by Inspector NgocLinh.

Colonel Khuc had told himself that if NgocLinh had come on anything but emergency business he would make him regret his rashness to the end of his days.

He had got out of his silken bed, put on a black silk kimono with a gold dragon embroidered on the back and had moved silently on bare feet into his study where the Inspector was waiting.

Until his servant brought him a glass of tea and had gone away, Colonel Khuc had ignored the Inspector who stood motionless in front of the vast carved desk.

The narrow black gleaming eyes had finally moved to the Inspector's

face.

“What is it?” the Colonel asked softly.

If there was one thing he could do better than another, the Inspector could make a concise report. He had the ability to marshall all the important facts and to bring them out clearly, quickly and in their right order.

Colonel Khuc listened without interruption. From time to time he sipped his tea, but apart from the movement of his thick arm, he sat motionless.

When the Inspector ceased to speak, Colonel Khuc continued to stare at him without seeing him while his brain raced over the facts given to him.

The Viet Minh attack and the kidnapping of the American were matters of routine. They had happened before “and no doubt, they would happen again. Apart from a face-saving show of activity which would lead nowhere, there was nothing the Colonel could do about it.

But why had this American murdered his houseboy?

This was something that would require the most cautious and careful investigation. The American must have had a very good reason to have done such a thing. Before the murder became public news and before the American Ambassador was informed, Colonel Khuc was determined to know what this reason was.

“What do we know about Haum?” he asked.

“I came to you immediately, sir,” the Inspector said. “I have had no time to check his record card.”

Colonel Khuc rang a bell on his desk. The door opened almost immediately and his secretary, Lam-Than, came in.

Lam-Than was a tiny man with a slight limp. He had been the Colonel’s creature for a number of years. It was said that there was nothing too bad, nothing too disgusting, nothing too degrading he wouldn’t do for the Colonel. He was feared and hated by all members of the police. It was said it was he who obtained opium for the Colonel; the very young girls who were sacrificed to the Colonel’s depravity, and it was he who organized the extortion system that provided the Colonel with his wealth.

This tiny man limped to the Colonel's desk and stood waiting.

"I want all the information you have on Steve Jaffe, an American working with American Shipping and Insurance Corporation; on his houseboy Haum; on his cook, Dong Ham, on Haum's girl, My-Lang-To," the Colonel said, then turning to the Inspector, he went on, "Wait here."

He left the room, followed by Lam-Than who ignored the Inspector.

When the door closed, the Inspector remained motionless, aware of the real possibility that one of the Colonel's spies was watching him through some concealed peephole.

He remained motionless for twenty minutes, then Colonel Khuc returned, showered, shaved and wearing an immaculate lounge suit.

The time by the ornate gold desk clock was five minutes past six.

"We will go to the American's villa," Khuc said. At this moment Lam-Than came in.

"You will come with me," Khuc said. The three men went out to the Inspector's car. Khuc and Lam-Than got in the back while the Inspector slid under the driving wheel.

At this hour only the coolies and the market vendors were moving on the sidewalks. No one paid any attention to the black Peugeot as it swept along the empty streets.

Khuc said, "What do we know about Haum?"

"He was a good citizen," Lam-Than said. "He was studying political science. He was a supporter of the regime. He has never been in debt. We have nothing against him."

"Was he a homosexual?"

"Most definitely not. We have absolutely nothing against him."

Colonel Khuc frowned. His first thought had been that Haum and this American had had an unnatural association, Haum had attempted blackmail and the American in a fit of rage had killed him. Obviously, it wasn't as simple as that.

"The cook?"

“He is a very old man and he has had nothing to do with politics for the past twenty years. At one time he was cook to the French Ambassador during the French regime. He is suspected to pro-French tendencies, but we have nothing further against him.”

Colonel Khuc stroked his fat, flat nose and looked sideways at Lam-Than who was staring at the back of Inspector NgocLinh’s head.

“And the girl?”

“Politically nothing. However, there is a rumour that her father has had incestuous relations with her. This is probably true. Her father is a degenerate.”

Again Colonel Khuc stroked his nose.

“So we would have a reasonable excuse to get rid of these two?”

“Yes, we could get rid of them,” Lam-Than said. The Inspector, listening to this conversation, moved uneasily. There were times when he wished he did not have to work for Security Police.

“Now tell me about the American,” the Colonel said.

“He follows closely to the usual American pattern,” Lam-Than said. “He drinks too much. He chases women. He is non-politically educated. He has been divorced. He is short of money. He goes often to the Paradise Club to satisfy his sexual appetite.”

“Nothing else?”

Lam-Than shrugged his shoulders.

“He is an American. There is nothing else.”

“He isn’t a homosexual?”

“No.”

The Colonel frowned.

Then why did he kill the boy? he asked himself. What could be the reason?

There was silence in the car for the few remaining minutes before it pulled up outside Jaffe’s villa.

The long street was deserted, and after a quick look to right and left, Colonel Khuc got out of the car and hurried up the drive with the Inspector and Lam-Than at his heels.

The Inspector was pleased that his driver didn't show himself. He led the others around to the back door where the driver was standing with his back against the cookhouse door which was closed.

As soon as the driver saw the Colonel he came to attention and stood rigid, his eyes round with fright.

"Has anyone been here?" the Inspector asked.

"A girl," the driver said, scarcely able to form his words so great was his fear of the Colonel. "Her name is My-Lang-To. She wanted me to enter the villa. I have locked her and the old man in the man's sleeping quarters."

"Did she say why she wanted you to enter the villa?"

"She said something has happened to her fiancée. She is sure he is in the villa."

The Inspector looked at the Colonel for guidance.

"That is all right," the Colonel said. "I will speak to her when I am ready." To the Inspector he said, "We will go inside."

The Inspector unlocked the back door and led the way into the sitting room.

The Colonel and Lam-Than looked around the room. Lam-Than immediately walked over to the smashed drinking glass on the floor and stared at it.

The Inspector said, "He was probably drinking when something happened to startle him and the glass slipped out of his hand."

Lam-Than looked at him, his evil face sneering.

"Surely that is obvious," he said. "What would be more helpful is to know what happened to make the glass slip out of his hand."

"Is that the picture the American and the boy put on the wall?" the Colonel asked, pointing to the picture. "It is a poor thing. Why should he want to hang such a thing on his wall?"

“Americans have very little taste,” Lam-Than said. “The picture probably reminded him of a girl with whom he has had an association.”

“Had he any particular girl?” the Colonel asked, turning to the Inspector.

“I don’t know, sir, but I will find out,” the Inspector replied.

“Do so. It could be important.”

Lam-Than was moving around the room like a cat that smells a mouse.

“There is a lot of plaster dust here,” he said. “Have you observed that, Inspector?” He bent down and made a long mark with his finger on the floor that revealed the floor was covered with dust. He straightened and stared at the picture, then he looked at the Inspector. “Please do me the favour of leaving the room,” he said, his acid voice suddenly sharp.

The Inspector stiffened. He looked at Colonel Khuc who waved him away. He went out of the room and closed the door behind him.

“What is it?” the Colonel asked, looking at Lam-Than with glittering eyes.

Lam-Than pulled a chair close to the wall on which the picture hung. He got up on the chair and lifted the picture down.

Both men stared at the hole in the wall for a long moment. Then Lam-Than put the picture against the wall and put his hand inside the hole. He groped around for a moment then withdrew his hand, shrugging.

“There is nothing there now,” he said and stepped off the chair.

The Colonel went over to an armchair and lowered his bulk into it. He took from his pocket a gold cigarette case, selected a cigarette and lit it with a gold and jade cigarette lighter.

“What was in it,” he asked.

Lam-Than smiled. It was a crooked sour smile, but at least it was a smile.

“You expect miracles, Colonel, but I could make a guess.”

“Guess then.”

“Do you know who once lived in this villa?”

“Why should I?” Khuc began to lose patience. “Do you?”

Lam-Than inclined his head.

“A Chinese woman. Her name was Mai Chang. She was once the mistress of General Nguyen Van Tho.”

The Colonel stiffened, then he slowly levered his bulk out of the chair.

“You mean the diamonds were hidden there?” His voice was a whisper. Every muscle in his gross body was tense.

Lam-Than smiled at him.

“It seems likely, Colonel, doesn’t it?”

For a long moment Colonel Khuc stared at his secretary. Then his lips moved off his white teeth in a wolfish smile.

“So that’s why he killed the boy,” he said, half to himself. “Of course. I would have killed him myself.”

There was a pause, then Lam-Than said in his matter-of-fact voice, “The thing we must find out is whether the American has really been kidnapped or is hiding — with the diamonds.”

“Yes,” the Colonel said, nodding his bald head. “That is obviously something we should find out.”

“And if he is hiding, with the diamonds,” Lam-Than went on, “we must find him and persuade him to give us the diamonds. It is said they are worth two million American dollars. That is a useful sum: a sum any man could happily retire on.” he looked intently at Colonel Khuc who stared back at him. “Certain mouths, of course, will have to be silenced; the cook and the girl. We shall have to find the American. The Inspector can find him, but it may be necessary after silencing the American, to silence the Inspector too.”

Colonel Khuc stroked his smooth shaven jowls. His gross yellow face split into a genial smile.

“As usual your reasoning is impeccable. I will leave the matter in your hands. See to it.”

Lam-Than rehung the picture and put the chair back in its original

position.

At the Colonel's signal, he opened the door and beckoned to the waiting Inspector.

chapter six

I

The six a.m. Thudaumot-Saigon bus banged and jolted along the highway to Saigon. It was laden with market produce that crowded its roof and sprouted out of the windows. Peasants, in their black working dress, were crammed into the bus like sardines in a tin. They clutched onto their wares, giggling nervously as each jolt of the bus threw them violently against their neighbours.

Crushed between a fat old woman clinging to a large basket of cut sugar cane and an evil-smelling old man holding six brushes made of duck feathers, Nhan endured the jolting ride.

She was scarcely aware of the discomfort. Her mind and her slight body was frozen in terror as she thought back on the events of the night.

The cycle ride to Thudaumot had been a nightmare experience. During the last long mile, Steve had had to push her; her legs had become so weak it had been impossible for her to turn the pedals any longer.

How thankful she had been to enter her grandfather's house! How kind the old man had been to her! He had seen her terror and had soothed her, holding her in his arms, assuring her there was nothing to be so frightened about.

While she had told him about Steve who had waited outside, her grandfather had continued to hold her, running his hand over her hair and petting her as he used to do when she had been very young until she had felt quite secure again and no longer terrified.

Then Steve had come in and he and her grandfather had talked while she rested in the other room, staring up at the dark ceiling while she listened to the low drone of their voices.

Her grandfather had come in to her after some time. He had said he would shelter Steve. There was nothing for her to worry about. Steve

would now talk to her, but he wanted her to know she need not be frightened. He would take good care of her lover and he wanted her to know that he thought the big American would make her a most suitable husband.

He had smiled, patting her hand.

“I never thought the day would come when I should have such good news of you. There is no future in this country for you. It is only in America that you will find prosperity. There is, of course, still much to arrange, but it will come out right in the end. You will have to exercise patience and courage. You must remember that nothing worthwhile comes easily.”

Then Steve had been impatient and curt, but Nhan had made allowances. He was in bad trouble and very worried. She didn’t expect kindness from him. Naturally, he had to think of himself.

He had told her she must get back to Saigon as quickly as possible. He had already asked her grandfather about the buses back. There was one at six o’clock — in an hour’s time. She must go on that. On no account must she tell her mother or her uncle or her three brothers where she had been.

Nhan sat huddled up against the wall, staring at Steve while he talked. Cold terror again paralysed her mind. She kept nodding her head as he talked, trying to appear to be listening intelligently. She wanted so desperately to be strong and win Steve’s approval, but she could see, as he talked to her, there was that exasperated, angry expression that came to his face whenever he talked to her about anything she didn’t grasp immediately.

“Are you listening?” he demanded. “Don’t sit there, for Pete’s sake, looking like a damn mesmerized rabbit! All you have to tell them is we went to the river, we talked and I took you home at eleven o’clock. I drove away and you haven’t seen me since. That’s simple enough, isn’t it?”

Was it? She thought with hopeless despair of her mother and her uncle when she tried to persuade them to believe that she had slept in her bed from eleven onwards when they would know she hadn’t slept in her bed at all. Her uncle was a simple and difficult man. He always waited up for her until she returned from Paradise Club. She knew she would have to talk for hours before there was a hope of persuading him that she had been in bed by eleven. Unless she told him the truth,

and that was unthinkable, she didn't think she could convince him.

"Wake up!" Steve had said sharply, shaking her arm. "It's simple enough, isn't it?"

Because she was afraid to excite his contempt, she had nodded dumbly.

"And you mustn't tell anyone about the diamonds," he went on, lowering his voice. "No one. You understand that, don't you?"

Again she nodded.

He made a movement of exasperation, then stood up and began to pace up and down the small room.

"I'll want some cigarettes," he said. "Get me two hundred Luckies. I expect you'll find a bus that comes out here this afternoon, and don't forget to bring a newspaper with you."

Again she nodded.

"I'll probably have decided by the time you come again what I'm to do," he went on. "Be careful of Blackie Lee. He's certain to ask questions. I've got to decide if I can trust him or not. If he questions you, be careful you don't let on where I am." He had looked around the small, skimpily furnished room. The quicker I'm out of this dump the better, but I mustn't take risks . . . You rest for a while. You have nearly an hour before the bus goes. I'm going to get rid of those two bicycles."

He had started for the door. In a panic, Nhan had flung her arms around him.

"Don't leave me," she had begged. "I'm frightened! Isn't there some other way? Wouldn't it be better to go to the police? If you gave them the . . ."

"Stop it!" he had said roughly, pushing her away. "I told you: not a word about the diamonds! I'm keeping them! Do what I'm telling you and it'll work out all right!"

He had left her, her head in her hands, hopeless in her misery.

Ten minutes before the bus was due to leave, just when it was beginning to get light, he had returned. He had told her he had

dumped the two bicycles in the river.

As the bus arrived at the Saigon Central Market, she thought of her parting with him. He had suddenly become tender, but his tenderness hadn't reduced her terror. With him she was sure she could face anything, but to have to cope with this deception alone filled her with hopeless despair.

As she hurried along the narrow streets towards her apartment, wondering how she could persuade her mother and her uncle to believe the lies she had to tell, Colonel On-dinh-Khuc was completing his instructions to Inspector NgocLinh.

He was saying that he had reason to believe that the American, Steve Jaffe, hadn't been kidnapped by the Viet Minh. For reasons as yet unknown, Jaffe had murdered his houseboy. That was an established fact. It would be very convenient for Jaffe if it were believed he had been kidnapped. There was a possibility that Jaffe had gone into hiding and would attempt to leave the country, he must be prevented from doing so.

The Inspector was to make inquiries. He was to satisfy the Colonel that either Jaffe had been kidnapped or was hiding. If he was in hiding, the Inspector was to discover his hiding place. When the hiding place was discovered, he was to make no move to arrest the American. He was to tell the Colonel where the American was hiding and the Colonel would then decide what action to take.

Dong-Ham and My-Lang-To were to be taken to Security Police Headquarters. They were to talk to no one, but put in separate cells and to remain under lock and key until the Colonel interrogated them personally. Any information he obtained from them would be passed on to the Inspector to assist him in his search for the American.

The Colonel would report to the President that the American had been kidnapped, and no doubt, the President would have this information conveyed to the American Ambassador. The Inspector should understand it would be against the interests of the State for the American Ambassador to be told that Jaffe had murdered his houseboy. This unfortunate incident must remain a secret, and the Colonel would hold the Inspector responsible for keeping it a secret.

There was a pause, then the Colonel went on, "The body of the houseboy must be discovered near the police post. It will be presumed that he was with the American when they were attacked by the

bandits. While the American was kidnapped, the boy was killed. Is that understood?"

Inspector NgocLinh's small black eyes flickered, but he said stolidly, "It is understood, sir."

He watched Colonel Khuc and Lam-Than leave the villa, get into the police car and drive away. As soon as they had gone, he relaxed and moved around the room, his brown face puzzled. Then he looked at the picture on the wall. He pulled up a chair, stepped up on it and raised the picture. He stared at the hole in the wall, then he settled the picture back in its place, replaced the chair and moved thoughtfully across the room and into the kitchen.

On the other side of the town in a small sparsely-furnished room, Nhan squatted in front of her mother and her uncle and explained for the second time what they were to say if the police questioned them about her whereabouts the previous night.

Nhan's mother was a tiny woman of forty-six. She had on a shabby wrap and her hair hung loose, framing her dried-up wrinkled face. She looked a lot older than her years. Her husband had been a waiter at the Majestic Hotel. He had been killed in a road accident some years ago and she had had a struggle to keep the home together which she had done by selling flowers in the market. It had been a fortunate thing when Blackie Lee had come to her and suggested that Nhan should work at his club. Since Nhan had been at the club, her mother had given up flower selling. She had even invited her brother to live with them.

Her brother was considerably older than her. He was a fat, stupid man who told fortunes outside the Tomb of Marshal Le-van-Duyet. He wasn't a good fortune teller and consequently he made very little money. He was glad to have free board and lodging.

"If the police come here," Nhan said, speaking slowly, "you must say that I came home at eleven and went to bed. It is most important that you should say this."

Her uncle squinted at her, frowning.

"How can I say such a thing when you were out all night?" he finally asked. "I was here all the evening. Your bed hasn't been slept in."

"That is true," Nhan's mother said. "Lies lead to trouble. We don't want trouble in this house."

“If you don’t tell this lie,” Nhan said desperately, “there will be bad trouble in this house.”

Her uncle put his hand under his coat and scratched his ribs.

“If the police question me,” he said obstinately, “I shall say you were out all night. In this way I shall not become involved in your trouble. Your mother must also tell the truth. I have always thought that American would get you into trouble. I wish to have nothing to do with the matter.”

“If you don’t do what I am asking you to do,” Nhan said hopelessly, “I shall lose my job and go to prison. There will be no money in the house at the end of the week and my mother will have to sell flowers again.”

Her uncle blinked. This he hadn’t thought of. He might even have to leave this comfortable home.

“No matter how wicked your daughter is, it would not be right for her to lose her job,” he said after some thought, addressing Nhan’s mother. “Besides, you have your sons to consider. If there is no money, who will feed them? Perhaps, after all, it would be better to tell this lie.”

Her mother had no wish to sell flowers again. With a show of reluctance, she agreed that perhaps her brother was right.

Watching them, Nhan saw with relief she had used the right tactics.

“Then if the police ask you you will tell them I returned at eleven and remained in bed all night?” she asked.

“If it will save this house the disgrace of you going to prison,” her uncle returned, “then we are compelled to tell this lie.” He turned to his sister. “Bring me the bamboo stick. This girl has a wicked devil in her. It is my duty to you and to your sons to drive this devil out of her.”

Her mother got up and went to the cupboard where the bamboo stick was kept. Her brother used the stick often on her three sons. She felt it was right for him now to use on her daughter.

Colonel On-dinh-Khuc bit into an apple while he studied the typed questionnaire Lam-Tham had handed to him.

The time was fifteen minutes past eight a.m. Much had been done since he had returned to headquarters. Dong Ham and My-Lang-To had been questioned. Haum's body had been taken to the shattered police post and had been planted in the ditch near where the two Viet Minh bodies had been found. The President's private secretary had been informed that the American had been kidnapped. The American Ambassador in his turn had been informed. Three officers of the U.S. Military Police had gone to the scene of the outrage where they busied themselves taking photographs, examining the Chrysler and consulting with the Vietnam police.

The Colonel munched his apple as he studied Dong-Ham's replies to the questions put to him by Lam-Than.

"Not much here," he said finally, putting the paper down on his desk. "We had better find this girl he mentions. She 'probably knows nothing, but we'd better make sure. Someone is bound to know who she is and where she lives. Tell NgocLinh to inquire at this club. They'll probably know her name."

Lam-Than inclined his head.

The Colonel dropped the apple core into the waste paper basket.

"Nothing of any value in the girl's report," he went on. "It is unfortunate she insists that the houseboy is still in the villa. The old cook seems to think so too." He looked up at Lam-Than. "When it is known the boy went with the American and was killed by the Viet Minh, these two could make difficulties. If the American police have an opportunity to question them, the situation could become involved."

Lam-Than had already thought of this difficulty.

"The old man has no relations," he said. "There would be no complications if he met with an accident. The girl has a mother and father, but providing the matter is handled with care she could also be removed without difficulty."

The Colonel stroked his fleshy jowls.

"I'll leave it to you," he said. "Arrange something. It is better for the State to have no complications."

Lam-Than inclined his head. He picked up the two questionnaires and went out of the room.

A little after eleven o'clock, Inspector NgocLinh arrived at the Paradise Club.

He was seen getting out of his car by Yu-lan, who pressed a button which lit up a red light in Blackie's office, a warning that prepared him for the Inspector's visit.

The Inspector found him reading the morning's newspaper.

Blackie rose to his feet, bowed and offered the Inspector a chair. Yulan came in with two glasses of tea which she placed on the desk. She bowed and smiled at the Inspector who bowed in return, his face expressionless.

When she had gone, the Inspector sipped his tea, passed a complimentary remark about its quality, then seeing Blackie was waiting, he said, "You know an American gentleman: Mr. Jaffe?"

This was something Blackie was not expecting to be asked.

However his face remained bland and smiling although his mind was startled. He immediately remembered Jaffe's strange hints about obtaining a false passport. Now here was the police officer inquiring about him.

"Ah yes," Blackie said. "He comes here quite often."

"Was he here last night?"

"Yes, I believe he was."

"What time was this?"

"About nine o'clock. I can't say I noticed the exact time."

So Jaffe had been here, the Inspector thought, five hours after he had murdered the houseboy. What had he done in the meantime?

There was a pause, then Blackie asked, "Has something happened to this gentleman? I should be sorry if it had."

“He has been kidnapped by Viet Minh bandits. You will read about it in tomorrow’s newspapers.”

To say Blackie was astonished would be an understatement. He stared at the Inspector in bewilderment.

“Kidnapped by Viet Minh bandits?” he repeated. “Where was this then?”

“You will read about it in tomorrow’s newspapers,” the Inspector said curtly. “There are certain things we wish to know about the American. What is the name of the woman he associated with here?”

Blackie’s eyes went dull. He reached for a cigarette and lit it.

“He associated with no particular girl,” he said. “He came here and hired any girl to dance with him he happened to fancy.”

“I have reasons to believe he favoured one particular woman,” the Inspector said. “I want to know her name.”

“If I could help you, I would,” Blackie said, bowing. “But I had no idea he was associating with one particular girl.”

“His servant says a girl used to come to his house two or three times a week,” the Inspector said, staring hard at Blackie. “He used to come to this club quite often. It is reasonable to assume he met the girl here.”

“I should be surprised if he did,” Blackie said. “My girls don’t sleep with Americans. It is possible he met this girl at some other club.”

“The girl has to be found quickly,” the Inspector said and got to his feet. “Extensive inquiries will be made. Are you quite sure you don’t know the girl? I ask you again because if later it is found that you did know her and you withheld this information deliberately from us, you will be in serious trouble. It would be a simple matter to close this club.”

Blackie was quite certain none of the girls working at the club would give Nhan away. The few Americans who came to the club probably had seen Jaffe with Nhan, but they wouldn’t know her name. He felt reasonably safe in refusing to be bluffed by the Inspector.

“If it will assist you, I will make some inquiries myself,” he said blandly. “It is possible someone I know will be able to help. If I get the girl’s name I will telephone you.”

The Inspector had to be content with that. When he had gone, Blackie left the club and took a pousse-pousse to the house where Nhan lived. The time was a little after noon: a good time to call. Nhan's uncle was at the Temple and her mother was with a neighbour across the street.

He knocked on the door. After waiting a few moments, he knocked again. Nhan opened the door. He could see at once that she had been crying and she seemed in a very nervy and frightened state.

"I want to talk to you," Blackie said and moved into the room. "The police called on me this morning, making inquiries about the American."

Nahn stared at him, backing away, her eyes wide with terror.

Without appearing to notice her terror, he went on, "They asked me the name of the girl who goes to his villa."

Nhan leaned against the wall. She put her trembling hands behind her, out of sight. She continued to stare at Blackie. She seemed unable to speak.

"They told me the American has been kidnapped by bandits," Blackie went on. "This I do not believe. I decided to see you first before I told them you are the girl they are looking for."

Nhan closed her eyes, then slowly opened them. She still said nothing.

Blackie waited for a few moments, then asked, "Were you with him last night?"

Nhan nodded.

"What has happened to him?"

"We drove to the river and we talked until eleven o'clock. He drove me home and I then went to bed," Nhan said in a quavering voice: the words came out so automatically Blackie was sure she had rehearsed and rehearsed them.

"Where is he now?"

There was a long pause before she said, "I don't know."

The fact that she looked so quickly away from him, told him she was lying.

He took out his cigarette case, selected a cigarette and lit it. During this pause, he continued to stare at her and she seemed to shrivel under his stare.

"The police are anxious to find him," he said. "They threaten me with trouble if I don't tell them your name. If you know where he is and if you didn't see him after eleven o'clock last night, I see no reason why I shouldn't give them your name."

Nhan stiffened. Her face blanched, but she said nothing.

"If the police think you are lying," Blackie said, "they will persuade you to tell the truth. They have a number of ways of persuading people to tell things they don't wish to tell. Even the bravest people finally tell them what they want to know." He paused and asked quietly, "Are you very brave, Nhan?"

She shuddered.

"Please don't tell them," she whispered.

"You know where he is?"

She hesitated, then squaring her shoulders and looking directly at him, she said, "No, I don't," but the tone of her voice was so unconvincing that Blackie felt sorry for her.

He drew on his cigarette and released a cloud of smoke down his nostrils.

"Last night, the American came to me and asked me if I could get him a false passport. He didn't say it was for himself, but I am sure it was. This told me he wants to leave the country and also that he is in trouble. I don't believe he has been kidnapped. I think he is hiding somewhere. Without help, he will eventually be found. It is possible I could help him, but before I do help him, I should want to know what the trouble is and how much he would pay for my help. If the trouble is very bad, the payment naturally would be high. It is possible he will get into touch with you. If he does, will you tell him I am anxious to help him?"

Nhan remained frozen. She didn't say anything, but by the way her dark eyes flickered Blackie was satisfied that she had understood what he had said. He got to his feet.

"I think it would be unwise for you to come to the club for a few

days,” he said. “If you need any money, I will be happy to finance you. If you see the American, please don’t forget to tell him what I have said.”

Then as she still said nothing, he put on his hat, nodded to her and walked slowly down the stairs into the hot street.

He paused for a moment on the edge of the kerb, a puzzled frown on his face, then waving to a passing *pousse-pousse*, he told the boy to take him back to the club.

chapter seven

I

While Blackie Lee was being conveyed back to his club in the pousse-pousse, a curious scene was being enacted at the Headquarters of Security Police.

At the back of the Headquarters building where the police cars were garaged, there was a narrow lane screened on one side by the high brick wall that surrounded the Headquarters' building and on the other side by a high, thick hedge.

This narrow lane was seldom used except by a few peasants, taking a short cut to the General Market.

At a few minutes past noon, two uniformed policemen opened the double gates of the garage yard and walked briskly down to the far ends of the lane. There they stood with their backs to each other, separated by fifty yards of dusty gravel roadway. They had been given strict orders to stop anyone using the lane for the next twenty minutes.

While they were taking up their positions, another uniformed policeman, thin and boyish-looking, got into a police jeep and started up the engine. Anyone looking at him closely would have seen that he was sweating profusely and his brown face revealed a tension that seemed unnatural for the simple job he appeared to be doing.

At exactly fifteen minutes past twelve, just as Blackie Lee was paying off the pousse-pousse boy, My-Lang-To who had been sitting in a hot dark cell for the past three hours, heard a key grate in the lock and the lock snap back.

She got to her feet as the steel door swung open. A uniformed policeman beckoned to her.

"You are no longer required," the policeman said. "You can go home."

My-Lang-To came timidly out of the dark heat into the sunlit corridor.

“Is there no news of my fiancé?” she asked. “Has he been found?”

The policeman took her thin arm in a hard grip and pushed her down the corridor and into a courtyard where a number of police jeeps were parked.

“When we have news of your fiancé, you will be told,” he said and pointed to the open gateway. “That is your way out. Be satisfied that you have your freedom.”

There was something in the man’s voice that frightened the girl. She suddenly felt an urge to get away from this place: a frantic urge that stifled her and made her quicken her steps into a near run.

She made a neat and charming figure in her white tunic sheath, her white silk trousers and her conical straw hat as she hurried across the sun-filled courtyard.

The policeman sitting in the jeep, its engine running, shifted the gear stick into first gear. Sweat from his face fell onto the white sleeves of his immaculate jacket.

My-Lang-To passed through the open gateway and into the lane. She turned to the right and began the long walk to the main street. Ahead of her, she saw the back of a policeman who was standing at the top of the lane.

She walked rapidly for some twenty yards before she heard the sound of a fast moving car coming up behind her. She looked over her shoulder at the police jeep that had swung out through the open gateway and was coming straight at her.

She stepped to one side and leaned against the wall to give the jeep room to pass. It was only in the last brief seconds of her life that she realized the driver of the jeep had no intention of passing her. He suddenly swung the wheel and before My-Lang-To could move, the steel bumper of the jeep slammed into her, crushing her against the wall. Neither of the policemen at the far ends of the lane looked around when he heard My-Lang-To’s scream. They had been told not to look around. They heard the jeep reverse and drive back to the courtyard, then there was a long silence in the lane.

Following instructions, they moved off into the main streets and went about their daily routine, but neither of them could blot from his mind the shrill scream of terror they had heard.

My-Lang-To's body was found ten minutes later by a passing peasant who was hurrying to the market with a load of vegetables skilfully balanced on a bamboo pole which he carried on his shoulder.

He stared for some horrified minutes at the crumpled figure and the white nylon sheath dyed red with blood before he dropped the bamboo pole and ran frantically to the gates of Security Police and hammered on them as he wailed out his discovery.

While My-Lang-To was walking to her death, in another quarter of Security Police, Dong-Ham was also about to die.

He was sitting in his small cell, nervously picking at the lump of hard skin on his hand when the cell door opened.

Two men, wearing only khaki shorts came in. One carried a large bucket of water which he set down in the middle of the cell. His companion beckoned to the old man to stand up.

Dong-Ham knew he was going to die. He stood up quietly and bravely. He allowed himself to be upended by the two men who handled him with the skill of experienced executioners. He didn't even attempt to struggle as they inserted his head into the bucket of water and held it there. He drowned after a few minutes with scarcely a movement. He was a man who accepted the inevitable with the belief that death was a release into a better world and that at his age, this release should be welcomed.

The man who had caused the death of these two simple people was lying full length on three narrow planks of wood, staring bleakly up at the wooden ceiling and smoking a cigarette. Jaffe kept looking at his watch. It would be another three hours before Nhan came with some news. He could hear her grandfather moving about in the downstairs room. He hoped the old man wouldn't come up and start talking again. He had had more than enough of him.

Anyway, Jaffe told himself, he was lucky to be here. The house stood alone. The nearest building was fifty yards down the road: a big lacquer factory. He had looked out of the window during the morning while the old man had been talking to him. Very few cars had passed: the majority of them full of tourists going to see over the factory. He thought he would be reasonably safe here so long as he didn't show himself.

He now turned his mind to the problem of getting out of the country. He had already decided reluctantly that he would have to ask Blackie

Lee to help him. He wished he knew how far he could trust the fat Chinese. There was a chance once Blackie knew the reason why he was in hiding that he would attempt to blackmail him.

He rolled on his side, grimacing at the hardness of the planks and took from his pocket the tin box containing the diamonds. He opened the box and examined the diamonds, feeling a surge of excitement run through him again at the sight of their brilliance. He counted them. There were fifty large stones and a hundred and twenty smaller ones. There was no doubt they were the highest quality. Carefully he picked one out of the tin and held it up to the light. He had no idea of its value, but it couldn't be less than six hundred dollars. It could be considerably more.

While he lay daydreaming of how he would spend the money once he had sold the diamonds, Blackie Lee was busy using the telephone. He rang several numbers before he finally tracked down Tung Whu, a newspaper reporter who wrote for the local Chinese newspaper.

Tung Whu didn't sound very pleased to speak to Blackie Lee, but that was of no importance to Blackie. Tung Whu owed him twenty thousand piastres which he had borrowed to meet an urgent gambling debt. He was therefore under an obligation to Blackie who up to now had told Tung Whu there was no hurry for the money.

Over the telephone, Tung Whu said he was very busy. Blackie said a busy man should be a grateful man. It was the man who had no work and no money (stressing the word) that he was sorry for.

There was a pause, then Tung Whu, now that the word 'money' had been mentioned, asked in a much milder tone if there was anything he could do for Blackie.

"Yes," Blackie said. "You can come here and lunch with me. I shall expect you," and he hung up as Tung Whu began to protest.

Thirty minutes later, Yu-lan ushered Tung Whu into Blackie's office.

Tung Whu was an elderly Chinese, wearing a shabby European suit and clutching a worn leather briefcase that contained a battered camera and a number of notebooks.

Blackie bowed to him and shook hands. He waved him to a chair and nodded to Yu-lan who stood waiting at the door.

Tung Whu said he really couldn't stay long. He was extremely busy.

Something unexpected had occurred and he had as yet to write his article for tomorrow's edition.

Blackie asked innocently what had happened. Tung Whu said an American had been kidnapped by Viet Minh bandits.

While he was speaking one of the club waiters came in with a tray containing bowls of Chinese soup, shrimps in sweet sour sauce and fried rice.

While the two men ate, Blackie drew all the known facts about the kidnapping from the reporter.

"It is puzzling the American authorities why this man Jaffe should have driven on the Bien Hoa road with his houseboy when he told his friend he was going to the airport with a woman," Tung Whu said as he gobbled up his soup. "It is thought the American was passing the police post when the first grenade was thrown. Both Security Police and the American police think the American might have been killed by the shrapnel from the grenade and the bandits have taken his body and hidden it somewhere. A search is going on for the body."

"So there is no truth that the American went to the airport with a woman?" Blackie asked casually.

Tung Whu nipped a large shrimp between his chopsticks and popped it into his mouth. He shook his head.

"It is thought this was an excuse the American made to persuade his friend to lend him his car. It is puzzling why he wanted the car because his own Dauphine has been found and examined. There is nothing wrong with it but he told his friend the car had broken down. There are a number of puzzling features to the affair."

At this moment the telephone bell rang and when Blackie answered it, a voice asked excitedly if Tung Whu was there.

Blackie handed over the receiver and watched Tung Whu while he listened to the explosive chatter at the other end of the line. Tung Whu said, "I will come at once."

He replaced the receiver and got to his feet.

"There is a new development," he told Blackie. "The houseboy's girl went to Headquarters for questioning. As she was leaving, she was hit by a car and killed."

Blackie's eyes went suddenly dull.

"And the driver of the car?"

"He didn't stop. The police are looking for him now. I must get back to the office."

When he had gone, Blackie lit a cigarette and stared thoughtfully into space. He was still sitting motionless when the waiter came in to clear away the remains of the meal and he waved the waiter impatiently away.

His thoughts were far too important to be disturbed.

II

A young Vietnamese lolled against a tree, watching the traffic move up the stately avenue that led to the Doc Lap Palace. He wore a black and white striped coat which he had had specially made from a picture he had seen in an American newspaper. It was a bad imitation of a 'Zoot' coat: exaggerated, heavily padded shoulders, narrow cuffs, and cut so that it reached to his knees. He wore black drainpipe trousers, a dirty white shirt with a string tie, and on his head, a Mexican hard straw hat.

This youth was known by the name of Yo-Yo. No one had ever heard his real name nor had anyone ever taken the interest to find out what it was. He was called Yo-Yo because a yo-yo was never out of his hands. He was an expert with this wooden toy which he spun endlessly at the end of its string to the fascination of his friends and the children of the neighbourhood.

Yo-Yo was thin, grubby and vicious looking. He earned a few piastres by working for Blackie Lee. When he wasn't working for Blackie Lee, he augmented his precarious income by picking pockets and extorting protection money from some of the pousse-pousse boys.

As he spun his yo-yo, his glittering black eyes half closed against the glare of the midday sun, a dirty little urchin ran up to him and breathlessly told him Blackie wanted him.

Yo-Yo looked at the little boy. He reached out with two thin bony fingers and pinched the boy's nose. His dirty finger nails made half crescents in the boy's flesh and made him scream out with pain. As the boy ran away, wailing and holding his nose, Yo-Yo signalled to a *pousse-pousse* and told the boy to take him to the Paradise Club.

There, Blackie told him to go immediately to Nhan Lee Quon's apartment and to wait outside. He was to follow the girl wherever she went, but was to make sure she did not see him. He was given forty piastres. As he handed over the money, Blackie told him he expected a report in the evening.

Yo-Yo took the money, nodded his curt nod and went down the stairs, humming under his breath.

A little after two o'clock, Nhan left her apartment, unaware that Yo-Yo was behind her. Further up the street she entered a tobacconist shop where she bought a carton of Lucky Strike cigarettes.

Yo-Yo followed her to the bus station where she bought a newspaper and got on the Saigon-Thudaumot bus. He sat at the back of the bus and played with his yo-yo while the peasants sitting around him watched the spinning wooden reel with fascinated eyes.

The bus stopped at the lacquer factory and Nhan got off, brushing past Yo-Yo without noticing him. He followed her and pausing under the shade of a tree, saw her walk briskly down the dusty street and enter a small wooden villa, its walls covered with pink and violet bougainvillea. He watched her rap on the door and enter, closing the door behind her.

He lit a cigarette and squatted down with his back against the tree and began flicking the yo-yo to the length of its string, bringing it back with a little snap of his wrist into the palm of his dirty hand.

Nhan ran up the stairs and threw herself into Jaffe's arms. He kissed her impatiently, then taking the newspaper from under her arm, he went back into his room and going over to the window, scanned the headlines. Finding nothing there, he turned the pages rapidly until he satisfied himself. He tossed the paper away, thinking he shouldn't have expected any news yet. Well, at least, it meant the search for him hadn't begun, and he let himself relax.

He looked over at Nhan who had taken off her conical-shaped hat and was arranging her hair in the mirror on the wall. Her doll-like beauty moved him, and he went over to her, picked her up and sat her on his

knees. He felt her flinch and stiffen as he handled her and he looked at her, puzzled.

"I didn't hurt you, did I? What's the matter?"

She shook her head. Nothing. You didn't hurt me." She took his hand in both of hers. "I'm worried. The police have been to see Blackie."

Jaffe felt his heart give a little jump. "Well, go on. How do you know?" he asked, staring at her.

Sitting bolt upright on his knees, she told him of Blackie Lee's visit and what he had said. Jaffe listened, his face hard, his eyes uneasy.

So the hunt for him was on after all, he thought sourly. He should have known they would have found Haum's body by now.

"Will he give you away?" he asked.

She tried to control a shiver of fear. "I don't know."

"I've got to trust him. I don't know anyone else who I can trust. Does he know your grandfather lives here?"

"I've never told him. I don't think he does."

"I've got to deal with him. I'll have to meet him somewhere. Where can I meet him, Nhan? Not in Saigon. It'd be too risky, but not far from here. I'll have to walk."

"You could use my grandfather's bicycle," she said.

He hadn't thought of a man so old as her grandfather having a bicycle. He brightened.

"That's fine. Well now, where can we meet?"

She thought for a moment.

"There's an old temple not far from here. It is not now used. You could meet there," and she went on to describe where the temple was.

"Fine! Now look you tell him you have talked with me and I want to see him. Tell him to meet me at the temple at one o'clock tonight."

Nhan nodded.

“How about your mother and your uncle?” he asked.

“It is all right.” She couldn’t bear the pain of sitting on his muscular knees any longer. Her back was still burning from her uncle’s beating. She slid off his knees and squatted down in front of him, her eyes dull with misery. “I have talked to them. They understand.”

Well that was something, Jaffe thought, but for all that, he was worried. If only he knew if he could trust the fat Chinese or not!

He looked down at Nhan and he suddenly realized how beautiful she was. The worry in her eyes, her small beautifully-shaped face gave his heart a jolt, and he felt an urgent need to make love to her. He got up and crossed to the door, pushing home the bolt.

“Come here,” he said and walking over to the bed, he sat on it.

She came to him reluctantly and stood between his knees while he undressed her: a thing he always liked to do.

When she was naked, he picked her up. His hand felt a hard ridge on her thigh. Startled, he laid her on the bed and rolled her over on her face. The sight of the livid welts on her golden flesh sent a rush of blood to his head.

His desire for her went away. He was aware of an extraordinary sensation which he had never experienced before. A feeling of rage that made him tremble violently took hold of him. In this blind furious moment, he suddenly realized that he loved this girl: something he hadn’t ever realized before. He felt a murderous desire to get his hands on the person who had inflicted such pain on her and smash that person to pieces.

“Who did it?” he asked, his voice harsh and violent.

Nhan began to cry, hiding her face in the pillow as if ashamed.

He couldn’t bear to look at the bruised and broken skin. Gently he put over her her blue tunic sheath, then he went to the window and with a shaking hand he lit a cigarette.

“Who did it?” he asked, softening his voice with an effort.

“It’s nothing,” Nhan sobbed. “Come to me, Steve. Please. It is nothing.”

I must have been mad to have involved her in this, he thought. I am a stinking, selfish sonofabitch.

He threw the cigarette out of the open window, unaware that he was showing himself to Yo-Yo who had moved to a position opposite the villa and who stared up at him as he squatted, in the shade, spinning his yo-yo.

Jaffe turned and went over to Nhan and took her in his arms. He held her close to him, running his fingers through her hair. After a while she stopped crying and clung to him. She told him it was her uncle who had beaten her.

"It was his duty," she said. "He will now feel he can lie to the police. It is better this way."

Jaffe felt bad. He realized he had never treated her as anything but a pretty doll. He had used her when he had felt like it, and had dropped her when she had bored him. It was only now that he realized she was a human being with feelings, and he felt acutely ashamed of himself.

He decided then and there that he would marry her as soon as he possibly could and he would take her to Hong Kong with him. It pleased him to imagine her with him, to watch her delight when he bought her things, to see her astonishment when she saw America for the first time.

He stretched out beside her, holding her close to him and he talked. He told her what they would do together as soon as they were married and this time he was being sincere and he meant what he was saying. While he spun his dreams, Nhan relaxed in his arms, her aching body forgotten, her slim fingers stroking the back of his neck, happier than she had ever been before in her life.

It wasn't until just before seven o'clock that Yo-Yo saw her leave the villa and walk towards the bus stop.

He rose to his feet and slouched after her. He had had a satisfactory afternoon. He had rested in the shade and had been paid for doing nothing. This kind of job just suited Yo-Yo.

However, he was curious. During the long wait outside the villa, he had asked himself why Blackie Lee should have wanted one of his club girls watched. Who was the American he had seen at the window?

These questions, he told himself as the bus rattled towards Saigon,

needed answering.

At the Central Market Nhan left the bus and took a pousse-pousse to the club. This surprised Yo-Yo who followed in another pousse-pousse. He watched her go up the stairs of the club, then shrugging, he crossed the street to where a food vendor squatted and sitting down beside him, bought a bowl of Chinese soup which he ate hungrily.

Blackie Lee was talking to the leader of the dance band when Nhan came into the deserted dance hall. He saw her immediately and leaving the leader of the dance band, he went to meet her.

“I told you not to come here,” he said. “Go away.”

“I have to talk to you,” Nhan said and he was surprised at her firmness. “It is about Mr. Jaffe.”

Blackie became immediately interested.

“Come into my office.”

When he had closed the office door, he sat down at his desk.

“Well, what is it?”

Nhan sat down gingerly. She was still feeling very happy because now she was sure that Jaffe loved her and they would be married and they would go to Hong Kong together. She had never been entirely convinced by anything Jaffe had said to her in the past, but this time she had seen by the expression in his eyes, he was being sincere and she told herself, the eyes of a man can't lie. She was glad and grateful that her uncle had beaten her. The marks on her body had finally sparked off in Steve this new love. She felt confident now, and Blackie was aware of this new confidence.

She said Jaffe wanted to talk to Blackie. Would Blackie meet him at the old temple on the Bien Hoa road? Blackie hesitated for a moment or so.

“Where is he hiding?” he asked.

“That is the message he gave me,” Nhan said firmly. “I have nothing else to tell you.”

Blackie shrugged.

“I will meet him. Now go away and keep away.”

A few minutes after she had left, the door pushed open and Yo-Yo came into the office. He told Blackie of the events of the afternoon and how he had seen an American in the upstairs room of the little villa.

“This place belongs to the girl’s grandfather,” he said. “She left on the seven o’clock bus and then she came here.”

Blackie nodded. He took from his wallet five ten-piastre notes which he tossed over the desk to Yo-Yo.

“When I want you again,” he said, waving to the door, “I will send for you.”

“Do I continue to watch the girl?” Yo-Yo asked.

“No. I am satisfied with what you have told me. The matter is now closed.”

Yo-Yo nodded and went down into the darkening street.

The matter was certainly not closed so far as he was concerned. Why had the girl seen Blackie? What had they talked about to make Blackie Lee lose interest in having her watched?

Yo-Yo bought another bowl of Chinese soup. While he was eating it, he decided he would watch Blackie Lee.

For some time now, he had had an idea that a number of Blackie’s activities could bear investigation. If he could get something on him, he knew Blackie Lee would make a much more profitable subject for extortion than the few miserable *pousse-pousse* boys on whom Yo-Yo had to rely for his extra income.

A more profitable but also a much more dangerous subject, he warned himself. He would have to be very careful.

chapter eight

I

Just after midnight, Jaffe left his room and groped his way down the stairs to the front door. Behind a closed door nearby, he could hear Nhan's grandfather snoring. He stood for a moment listening, making sure he hadn't disturbed the old man, then he groped for the bolt, and slid it back.

The door made a faint creaking sound as he opened it. He peered out into the darkness. The moon was behind a haze of cloud. He could only see the dim outline of trees, and in the distance, the roof of the lacquer factory against the night sky.

He moved cautiously along the path that led to the shed where the old man kept his bicycle. Nhan had given him careful instructions. He had no difficulty in finding the bicycle which he wheeled onto the road, and mounting it, set off for his rendezvous with Blackie Lee.

When Nhan had left him, Jaffe had remembered to clean his gun. The gun gave him a strong feeling of security to know he had it and that it worked.

He had taken two of the smaller diamonds from the tin box and had screwed them up in a scrap of newspaper, putting the screw of paper in his shirt pocket. He hesitated whether to leave the other diamonds in the room, but decided it was too risky, so he put the box back into his hip pocket.

As he pedalled along the main road to Bien Hoa, he rehearsed the story he planned to tell Blackie. He was sure that there would be no mention in the papers of the diamonds. He wished he knew just what the story would be, and how much the police had already found out or had guessed. He would have to be careful with Blackie. He mustn't let him think he didn't trust him, but at the same time, he couldn't tell him the truth.

For the first quarter of a mile, he had the road to himself. He kept a look out for any approaching car and any movement in the forest

either side of him.

He had one bad scare when a buffalo, lying in the swamp mud, snorted and struggled to its feet at his approach. And later, he had seen the headlights of a car and had quickly jumped off his machine and had got off the road, lying down in the damp grass until the car had rattled past him.

Apart from the buffalo and the car, the ride to the temple was uneventful, and he arrived there at twenty minutes to one o'clock.

The temple stood in a courtyard, surrounded by high ruined walls. It was some two hundred yards from the main road. The narrow road that led to the temple was full of potholes and partly concealed by weeds and grass. It was a convenient meeting place, for Blackie Lee could drive his car into the courtyard and it would be concealed from the main road.

Jaffe walked his bicycle up the narrow road and when he was close to the temple gates, he laid the machine in the long grass where it was safely concealed. He walked to the temple and peered into the courtyard. It was too dark in there to see anything. He decided he would wait outside for Blackie. He had no wish to go into that hot darkness and possibly tread on a snake.

He found a clump of shrubs behind which he could hide and yet have an uninterrupted view of the main road and the road to the temple.

Punctually at one o'clock, he saw the headlights of a car coming. Blackie Lee's big American car jolted and bounced slowly up the narrow road.

Jaffe could see he was alone and he relaxed, suddenly aware that as the car had been approaching, his hand had been gripping the butt of his gun.

He watched the car drive through the gateway into the courtyard, then he got to his feet and walked across the grass and joined Blackie as he was getting out of the car.

"We'll talk in the car," Jaffe said and walking around to the far side, he got into the passenger's seat while Blackie, after a moment's hesitation, got back under the driving wheel.

Blackie had decided to listen and not talk too much. He wouldn't let the American know he already had some knowledge of this affair. It

would be more interesting and possibly more profitable to hear what the American had to say and to find out if he was going to lie or not.

He said, "Mr. Jaffe I don't understand what is happening. Nhan came to me this evening and said you wanted to talk to me here. Why could we not have met at the club or at your villa? This is all very mysterious and puzzling. I would be glad if you would explain."

"That's what I'm here for," Jaffe returned. "I'm in trouble. I'm the guy who wants a false passport. I have to get out of the country, and fast."

"I hope I am not a stupid man," Blackie said smoothly. "I guessed the passport was for you. I think I can help you. It will cost money, but providing you haven't committed a capital or a political crime, the matter won't be difficult to range."

Jaffe took out a crumpled pack of cigarettes. He offered a cigarette to Blackie who shook his head. He lit one for himself and Blackie who was watching him saw his hand was steady as he held the match flame to his cigarette.

"I have accidentally killed my houseboy," Jaffe said.

This came as a shock to Blackie. It was the last thing he had expected to hear.

He remembered what Tung Whu had told him. Both the Vietnam and the American police believed the houseboy had been murdered by bandits. Now here was the American saying he had killed the boy.

He managed to say calmly, "I don't understand, Mr. Jaffe. What you are telling me is very serious. How does anyone accidentally kill a man?"

"I caught him stealing from my wallet. He tried to get away. He was in panic. I guess I don't know my own strength. While he was struggling, I somehow broke his damn neck."

Blackie looked directly at Jaffe, his eyes running over his muscular frame.

"You are a very powerful man," he said, a note of respect in his voice. "Yes, it could easily have happened."

"Well, there I was with a body on my hands," Jaffe said, relaxing slightly as Blackie seemed to be accepting his story. "A tricky set-up. I

decided to clear out. You know what the police here are like. I could get a jail sentence. I'm relying on you to get me to Hong Kong."

Blackie couldn't accept such a story. It didn't make sense.

"You considered going to the police and explaining the situation, Mr. Jaffe? Houseboys are notorious thieves. If you had told them . . ."

"I thought of all that," Jaffe said curtly. "These Vietnamese don't like Americans. They might have shoved me in jail. I wasn't taking the risk."

This still didn't make sense to Blackie, but he decided to go along with the American.

"And the body?" he asked: "What happened to it?"

"I left it in a closet in my villa," Jaffe said. "The police have been to see you, haven't they?"

Blackie nodded. He was intrigued and puzzled. If Jaffe had left the body in the villa, how had it turned up in the ditch with the dead bandits? Who had moved it from the villa to the ditch? The police? Why had they given out to the newspapers that Haum had been killed by the bandits?

"They called on me," he said. "They told me you had been kidnapped by Viet Minh bandits. They wanted to know if you had any particular girl. Naturally I said I knew of no girl."

"Nhan had nothing to do with this. It happened before we met last night. She has nothing whatsoever to do with it."

Blackie didn't say anything. This was an acceptable lie. He was sure Nhan knew a great deal about this business. He couldn't understand why the police had moved Haum's body. There was no point in keeping this secret from Jaffe. He would read about it in the morning's paper. He decided to tell him.

"I spoke to a newspaper reporter this afternoon," he said. "He tells me the police are saying Haum was killed by the bandits. His body was found near the wrecked car you were driving."

For a long moment Jaffe sat motionless, not quite sure if he had heard correctly. Then he suddenly realized that if this were true he had put himself into Blackie's hands by prematurely admitting he had killed

Haum. He cursed himself for not waiting to read the papers before seeing Blackie. He realized at once why the police had moved Haum's body. Someone in authority wanted the diamonds!

They found the hole in the wall, he thought, and they knew the villa once belonged to the general's woman. They have guessed I found the diamonds and I killed Haum to shut his mouth. They are setting the stage so when they catch me, they can shut my mouth and grab the diamonds.

Blackie was saying, "This is a puzzling business, Mr. Jaffe. How do you explain that Haum's body was found in a ditch?"

"Maybe they don't want to make an international incident out of it. After all I am an American," Jaffe said cautiously.

"I don't think that explanation is likely," Blackie said. "A few months ago an American sailor murdered a prostitute in Cholon. The police didn't hesitate to arrest him. Why should they hesitate to arrest you? Why should they arrange matters to look like a Viet Minh outrage?"

"Maybe they didn't move the body. Maybe the girl and my cook moved it."

"If you mean My-Lang-To," Blackie said, "that suggestion is quite out of the question. How could they take the body so far? It may interest you to know your cook and the girl were taken to headquarters for questioning. As she was leaving headquarters she was knocked down and killed by a hit-and-run driver. This has happened before from time to time to people arrested for questioning. It is an efficient method of getting rid of people who could be embarrassing."

Jaffe felt a drop of sweat fall onto his hand. He realized he was suddenly scared.

"Nothing has been seen of Dong Ham," Blackie went on. "It would not surprise me if he too was dead by now."

And if they catch me, Jaffe thought, they'll kill me too.

"I don't understand anything of this," he said. "The thing is as much a mystery to me as it is to you."

That, my friend, is a lie, Blackie thought. Is this thing political? Could this American be working with an opposition group to overthrow the regime? Did Haum find this out and the American killed him to

silence him. No, it couldn't be that. He wouldn't be asking me for help if he had been working for a group. They would get him out of the country. Then what was the explanation?

"I don't like mysteries," he said. "I like to know all the facts before committing myself. When you took your friend's car, Mr. Jaffe, you were planning to escape?"

"That's right. I thought I might bluff my way into Cambodia with C.D. plates. As I arrived at the police post, the attack started and the car was put out of action."

"Was Nhan with you?"

"No." Jaffe paused, then went on, his voice hardening, "We're wasting time. Can you or can't you get me out?"

"As much as it would please me to help you," Blackie said, "what you ask is an impossibility. There is no way to get you out of the country: every exit by now has been sealed off. Security police are extremely efficient. Apart from the impossibility, Mr. Jaffe, I have myself to consider. I have a wife and a very good business. If it were discovered that I have even talked to you, they would close down my club. If it were found out I had helped you escape, I would go to jail."

Jaffe knew the Chinese character well enough to know this wasn't the final word.

"That I understand," he said, "but nothing is ever impossible providing there is a big enough incentive. I have got to get out. I'm willing to pay."

Blackie shook his head.

"Even if I could think of some method of getting you out, Mr. Jaffe, the cost would be prohibitive."

"That's for me to decide. Suppose you had unlimited funds, could you fix it?"

"Unlimited funds? I suppose something could be arranged, but we are wasting time. Who has unlimited funds these days?"

"I put a pretty high price on my life," Jaffe went on. "I admit I'm not wealthy, but I have funds in America. I could stretch to ten thousand American dollars."

Blackie remained slumped behind the steering wheel, but his mind alerted. This was the kind of money he was hoping to lay his hands on.

“I could get you out for half that sum, Mr. Jaffe,” he said, “if this wasn’t a capital charge, but unfortunately it is. I’m afraid it would cost a lot more than that.”

“How much more?” Jaffe asked who expected to haggle with Blackie.

“Twenty thousand would be closer to the mark.”

“I haven’t got it, but maybe I could borrow a little more from a friend. Twelve thousand would be the best I could manage.”

“For me, twelve thousand would be satisfactory, but I would have to ask my brother to help and he would have to be considered.”

“That’s up to you. You must make your own arrangements with him.”

Blackie shook his head sadly.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Jaffe. For twelve thousand I would be prepared to risk my business, but not for less. My brother would want five thousand. Without him, it would be impossible to get you out of the country.”

“But with him, you could?”

Blackie hedged.

“It is something I would have to think about and discuss with my brother.”

Jaffe pretended to think for some moments, then he said, “I will pay your brother four thousand: a total of sixteen thousand and that’s final.”

“Seventeen thousand,” Blackie said, sure now that he would get it and wondering how much Charlie, his brother, would take.

Jaffe was deliberately bargaining for the next move in the haggle.

“Well, okay,” He said, with a gesture of defeat. “Seventeen thousand, but Nhan comes with me for free.”

This surprised Blackie.

“You want the girl?”

“Yeah. Is it a deal?”

Blackie hesitated.

“She could complicate things, Mr. Jaffe.”

“Is it a deal?”

Blackie shrugged.

“It’s a deal, but I can’t promise anything. For seventeen thousand American dollars I will do my best for you, but I can’t guarantee anything.”

“You won’t get the money until I reach Hong Kong,” Jaffe pointed out. “I haven’t got it here. So if you don’t get me out, you won’t get the money.”

Blackie had expected that.

“There will be some preliminary expenses. I shall need some money now. Frankly, I don’t intend to advance any money myself for such a risky proposition. Unless you can supply me with a thousand American dollars immediately to take care of incidental expenses and my brother’s air passage, then I very much regret I can’t consider helping you.”

“But if I gave you this sum,” Jaffe pointed out, “And you can’t find a way to get me out, I will be the loser.”

“That is to be regretted,” Blackie said, “but we should be realistic. If we can’t get you out, you won’t need the money —you won’t ever need any money. Have you thought of that?”

Jaffe moved uneasily. He had thought of that.

“I haven’t got a thousand American dollars, but I have got a couple of diamonds here. I bought them in Hong Kong some years ago. I was going to have them made up as a ring for a girl I once knew. They are worth at least a thousand.”

Blackie looked surprised.

“I would prefer cash.”

Jaffe took out the screw of paper and handed it to Blackie. "I haven't got cash. You can sell these anywhere."

Blackie turned on the dashboard light and leaning forward, he carefully undid the paper and examined the diamonds. He didn't know a great deal about precious stones, but he could see these were good diamonds: whether or not they would be worth a thousand American dollars, only Charlie could tell him.

This was a tense moment for Jaffe. He could tell nothing from Blackie's bland, fat face. Had he believed the story about the diamonds? He seemed to have. Was he going to accept them?

Blackie looked up.

"Very well, Mr. Jaffe. I will return now and I will send a cable to my brother. Nothing can be done until I have talked to him."

"How long will that take?"

"I suggest we meet here at this time on Wednesday. By then I shall know if we can help you or not."

"I'll be here."

Jaffe got out of the car.

"I'm relying on you," he said and extended his hand through the open window.

"I will do my best," Blackie said and shook hands.

He watched Jaffe disappear into the darkness, then he again leaned forward to the light to examine the diamonds, a thoughtful expression clouding his face.

II

During the past twelve hours there had been ceaseless activity in the search for the missing Jaffe.

While Jaffe was cycling to his rendezvous with Blackie Lee, a meeting

was breaking up at Security Police Headquarters. Colonel On-dinh-Khuc and Inspector NgocLinh sat on one side of the table and Lieutenant Harry Hambley of the U.S. Military Police on the other.

The meeting had lasted an hour and the three men were no nearer to finding Jaffe than they had been when they had sat down.

In a long, wordy speech, the Colonel had explained what steps had been taken to find the missing American. Over five hundred troops were still combing the countryside. Six suspected Viet Minh sympathizers had been arrested and questioned, but without results. Notices had been printed offering a substantial reward for the return of the American. These had been nailed to trees at the known places where bandits often entered Vietnam. An offer of a large reward to anyone who had any kind of information concerning the kidnapping would appear in the press tomorrow.

Lieutenant Hambley had listened with undisguised impatience. This young man caused the Colonel slight uneasiness. He was a little disconcerted that the Lieutenant returned his stare with one as hard and as unflinching as his own.

Finally, the Colonel paused and Hambley took the opportunity to make a speech which disconcerted the Colonel still further.

“We don’t know for certain,” Hambley said, “that Jaffe has been kidnapped. It seems to me there is something mysterious and sinister going on. I’ll tell you why. We know Jaffe told Sam Wade he wanted to borrow his car to go to the airport with a girl, but the car was found miles from the airport and there was no girl, instead there was Jaffe’s houseboy, and he was dead. Jaffe had a .45 revolver. It’s missing; so is his passport. Before he disappeared, he drew all his money from the bank. Why did he do that? I wanted to talk to Haum’s girlfriend, but as soon as your people had talked to her, she gets killed by a mysterious hit-and-run driver. I wanted to talk to Dong Ham, the cook, but he’s completely disappeared. See what I mean? It’s all mysterious and sinister.”

The Colonel pushed back his chair. He said all these points raised by the Lieutenant would have his attention. Further inquiries would be made. A report would be submitted. The American Ambassador could rest assured that no stone would be left unturned to find Jaffe.

The Colonel then got to his feet, indicating the meeting was ended. After hesitating, Hambley shook hands. He said he hoped to hear from

the Colonel by tomorrow and left.

Colonel Khuc looked at Inspector NgocLinh with cold, angry eyes.

"You still have no idea whether the American has been kidnapped or is in hiding?" he asked.

"No, sir," the Inspector admitted. "I am still trying to trace this girl who used to visit the American. She may be able to help us."

"This Lieutenant is a troublemaker," the Colonel said. "Be careful how you deal with him. Now go and find this woman."

When the Inspector had gone, the Colonel rang for Lam-Than.

"Lieutenant Hambley will probably ask to visit Jaffe's villa tomorrow for another look around. He is suspicious," the Colonel said. "It is essential of course that he doesn't come across the hole in the wall."

Lam-Than permitted himself a smile.

"Three hours ago, sir," he said, "the wall was repaired. It was done by my brother who is skilled in such matters, and can be trusted."

The Colonel grunted.

"NgocLinh hasn't found the woman yet," he said. "Have you any ideas how we can trace her?"

"If there is anyone who knows who she is it is the owner of the Paradise Club. He knows all the women who consort with Americans," Lam-Than said. "We could arrest and question him."

"The Inspector has already questioned him."

Lam-Than's eyes lit up viciously.

"If we had him here, no doubt we could persuade him to talk."

The Colonel hesitated, then reluctantly shook his head.

"This man is well known to the Americans. It would be dangerous to arrest him — yet. We must be careful. If we have to, then we will do so, but we'll see if NgocLinh can find her first." He stroked his flat nose. "Are you sure the American can't slip out of the country?"

"Every exit is being watched," Lam-Than said.

The Colonel rubbed his bald head.

“He is armed.”

“Our men have been warned. He will be shot at sight.”

“But if the diamonds are found on him?”

Lam-Than smiled.

“I will recover them,” he said.

chapter nine

I

The following morning Nhan caught the nine o'clock bus to Thudaumot. She had with her a basket containing a number of American magazines, three paperback novels and the morning's newspapers. These were carefully concealed under some groceries and vegetables she had bought before catching the bus.

She had passed a worrying night. Carried away by Steve's plans, it was not until she was in bed and sufficiently relaxed to think seriously of her future with him that she began to realize the difficulties. The thing that worried her most was what would become of her mother, her uncle and her three brothers if she went to Hong Kong with Steve. They completely relied on her to provide the family income. She would have to talk to Steve about this. Unless he had some practical suggestion, she didn't see how she could leave them.

At least she had lost some of her terror. She had read the newspapers. The police seemed convinced that Steve had been kidnapped. There was no mention of the diamonds. She couldn't understand how Haum had been found in the ditch, but this she thought was very good for Steve. There was no question now of the police thinking he had killed Haum. She wondered about Steve's meeting with Blackie Lee. There were so many things to discuss with Steve. She was so impatient to be with him again!

Jaffe was also impatient to see her. He had been pacing the tiny room and continually looking at his watch. When he heard the bus coming, he went to the window and watched as it pulled up outside the lacquer factory.

There were very few people on the bus. He saw Nhan get off. She was wearing an electric-blue tunic over her white trousers, and no hat. The sight of her gave him a little jolt of sentiment.

When she came into the room, he held her close to him, gently touching her face with his lips while she relaxed against him, smiling, her eyes closed. She let him fondle her for some moments, then she

reached up and kissed him. "I have brought the papers," she said. They sat on the bed side by side, her head against his shoulder while he quickly scanned the badly set type.

It gave him an odd sinking feeling to see his name in print. The paper told him nothing he hadn't already learned from Blackie the previous night. As he expected, there was no mention of the diamonds. A quick look at the other paper confirmed this.

But unlike Nhan, he wasn't fooled by the police statement that he had been kidnapped by bandits and was probably dead. He was sure they were secretly searching for him, hoping to find him alive. They could not tell, of course, if he had been kidnapped or not, but he was quite sure that someone in authority knew about the diamonds and would continue to hunt for him until that someone had convincing proof he was dead and the diamonds out of reach.

"You see," Nhan said, "it is going to be all right. They don't know what happened to Haum. They don't know about the diamonds. They think you were kidnapped. It's good, isn't it?"

"Yes, it's good," he lied. There was no point in frightening her until he had to. He went on to tell her about his meeting with Blackie. "He has agreed to let me take you with me," he concluded. "It could be fixed by the end of the week. Who knows? In ten days, possibly less, we could be in Hong Kong."

He saw her face cloud.

"What's the matter? You want to go to Hong Kong with me, don't you?"

Yes, she wanted to go, she said, but she had others to think of beside herself. There were her mother, her uncle and her three brothers. There would be no real happiness for her if she deserted them and left them to look after themselves.

Jaffe put his arm around her.

"Don't worry about that," he said. "I'll fix it. I'll get a lawyer in Hong Kong to arrange an allowance for them. Once we get out of here, I'll be rich. You don't have to worry about them, kid. I'll fix it."

While they were talking, Lieutenant Hambley and Inspector NgocLinh were standing in the large sitting room of Jaffe's villa.

Hambley had gone all over the villa with a thoroughness that had made the Inspector uneasy.

“I knew there was more to it than kidnapping,” Hambley said, staring at the Inspector. “This guy was running away. I’ve checked with Pan Am. and I’ve dug out the record of his luggage when he first arrived here. He had three suitcases. One is missing. His shaving kit is missing. When he left here he took all his money.” He pointed his finger at the Inspector. “Jaffe was on the run. He never intended to come back here. That’s why he borrowed Wade’s car. He hoped he could bluff his way out with C.D. plates.”

This could be very awkward, the Inspector was thinking, if Hambley pursued this theory. He must convince this oversmart Lieutenant that his theory was wrong.

“I should like to speak frankly with you,” he said. “You haven’t been in Saigon very long, have you, Lieutenant?”

Hambley stared at him.

“What’s that got to do with it?”

“If I remember rightly, you came here two months ago. Two months is a very short time to get to understand the mentality and the methods of our enemy.”

Hambley shifted. He had been aware ever since he had arrived in Saigon that he wasn’t properly equipped for the job he had to do. It irritated him that he was unable to speak the language and had to work through interpreters all the time. He was continually finding the Vietnamese mentality utterly baffling.

“I don’t get any of this,” he said aggressively. “What are you driving at?”

“On the other hand,” the Inspector went on, ignoring the interruption, “we have had years of experience with these bandits. We know the sole purpose of their activities against us is to create political trouble. Nothing could please them more than to upset the good relations between your country and mine or create an unsavoury incident that would have repercussions in the world press.

Hambley became aware it was very hot in the room and that he was sweating. He took out his handkerchief and mopped his puzzled face.

“At the meeting last night,” the Inspector went on, “you raised several interesting points that you said were both mysterious and sinister. You were right in saying they were mysterious, but wrong to say they were sinister.”

“Don’t you think it’s sinister that the girl was killed as she left your headquarters and the cook has disappeared?”

“The cook hasn’t disappeared,” the Inspector said gravely. “He was found a few hours ago in the river.”

Hambley started. “He’s dead?”

“Oh yes, he’s dead.”

“I suppose you’re going to tell me he committed suicide?” Hambley said, his voice heavy with sarcasm. “Well, this makes it even more sinister. The houseboy, his girl and now the cook — all dead. Each of them would have been able to have given me a lead. It’s damn sinister!”

The Inspector smiled patiently.

“If I were in your place, Lieutenant, I would think the same thing, but with the information I have, it is not sinister at all. It would appear to be the most natural sequence of events imaginable.”

Hambley drew in a deep breath. He felt his temper rising, but he controlled himself with an effort.

“Look, suppose we cut the cackle and get down to facts? If you know so much, let’s hear what it is!”

“The key to this apparent mystery,” the Inspector said smoothly, “is that Haum, his girl and Dong Ham were agents of Viet Minh. Once you know that, the situation is neither mysterious nor sinister.”

Hambley felt suddenly deflated and unsure of himself. To give himself time to think, he took out a pack of cigarettes and lit one.

“Why didn’t you say so at the meeting?” he demanded.

“My dear Lieutenant, if I had known then I would naturally have said so, but it was only this morning that I learned of this.”

“How did you learn it?”

“There are many Viet Minh agents in Saigon. Every now and then some of them realize how much better life is here than in Hanoi. They become converts. It is through these converts we get some of our information. This particular informant was unwilling to give Haum, the girl and Dong Ham away while they were alive, but when he learned they were dead, he came to me and told me all had been active agents of the Viet Minh.”

Hambley groaned to himself. He was sure he was getting tangled up in a web of lies, but all the same, he would now have to step warily. This fantastic story just could be true.

“But what has all this to do with Jaffe’s disappearance?” he asked. “You’re not going to tell me Jaffe was a Viet Minh agent too, are you? Because frankly, if you do, I won’t believe it.”

The Inspector shook his head.

“Oh no, Lieutenant, nothing as childish as that. Tell me, what do you know about Mr. Jaffe? He is a countryman of yours. He has lived in Saigon for three years. What sort of man would you say he is or perhaps it would be more correct to say what sort of man would you say he was?”

Hambley had never met Jaffe to talk to. He had seen him a few times over a period of two months in various bars and nightclubs, but he had never taken enough interest in him to inquire about him. He realized with angry irritation that he knew absolutely nothing about Jaffe.

Watching him, the Inspector was pleased the way the conversation was going. This oversmart young man was being steadily pushed on the defensive. He wasn’t nearly so sure of himself as he had been.

“Well, I know he was a pretty successful business man,” Hambley hedged. “He hasn’t been in trouble as far as I know, He. . .”

“I mean what sort of private life did he lead, Lieutenant?” the Inspector interrupted. “It is only by a man’s private life that he should be judged.”

Hambley wiped his face again.

“I know nothing of his private life,” he admitted sullenly.

The Inspector was now ready to produce one of several aces his agile

mind had created during this conversation.

“You mentioned that Mr. Jaffe had drawn all his money out of the bank,” he said. “This withdrawal was done hurriedly and on a Sunday evening and through two hotels since the bank was shut. To you, Mr. Jaffe’s action suggested a man in flight. Would you not say, however, that there could be another explanation for his action?”

Hambley looked startled. He felt the blood rise to his face.

“You mean blackmail?”

“Exactly. I myself would say this is an action of a man under pressure and in need of a large sum of money and when a situation like that arises I always think of blackmail.”

Hambley found himself excusing himself.

“I had no reason to think Jaffe was a man who could be blackmailed,” he said slowly. “Have you any good reason to think so?”

The Inspector appeared to hesitate.

“Yes, unfortunately, Mr. Jaffe was without any doubt a pervert and a degenerate.”

Hambley stared at him. “What makes you say that?”

“There is a very simple explanation why he wanted to borrow Mr. Wade’s car and I assure you it had nothing to do with the car being equipped with C.D. plates. For some time now, Mr. Jaffe has been seen by my men trying to pick up girls in his car. For several weeks, he was unsuccessful. It seems to me to be an acceptable theory that, frustrated by his lack of success he might easily have blamed his failure on the smallness of his Dauphine rather than on the decency of the girls he tried to molest. I think Mr. Jaffe borrowed Mr. Wade’s big and rather ostentatious car in the hope of changing his luck. After all he did mention to Mr Wade he wished to use the car for an immoral purpose.”

Hambley stubbed out his cigarette.

“If he was annoying women in the streets,” he said curtly, “why didn’t your men pick him up?”

The Inspector lifted his shoulders.

“We naturally avoid arresting Americans where we can. The girls paid no attention to him. They came to no harm, and there was no official complaint made, so our men sensibly took no action although a report was sent to me.”

“This still doesn’t explain where Haum comes into it or why Jaffe was being blackmailed or why he took a gun with him or why he packed a bag. Are you suggesting he got some girl into trouble and decided to make a bolt for it?”

“Nothing of the kind, Lieutenant. This is a little more complicated than that. You may be surprised to learn that Haum was a homosexual.”

Hambley stiffened. For Pete’s sake! he thought. What’s coming next?

“I think it had been decided some time ago that Mr. Jaffe should be kidnapped and held to ransom. I think Haum and Dong Ham were planted in Mr. Jaffe’s villa for the express purpose of carrying out this kidnapping at the convenient time. However, I think Haum decided to make himself some money on the side. He demanded money from Mr. Jaffe.”

Hambley grimaced.

“You mean Jaffe and the houseboy . . .?”

“I think there is no doubt about that,” the Inspector said quietly. “This man was a degenerate. You will remember Mr. Wade said when he met Mr. Jaffe in the bar of the Majestic hotel he seemed ill at ease and worried? Later, he cashed the two cheques. While he was doing this, I think Haum received a telephone call. He was told to bring Mr. Jaffe to the Bien Hoa road police post. The idea was to kill two birds with one stone. To attack a police post very close to Saigon and while the bandits had men in the vicinity, to kidnap Mr. Jaffe.”

“How the hell do you know all this?” Hambley demanded. “How could Haum force Jaffe to go to the police post?”

“I don’t know all this as you put it, Lieutenant,” the Inspector said mildly. “I am advancing what seems to me to be a reasonable explanation based on my years of experience with these bandits. I suggest Haum knew Mr. Jaffe owned a gun. I think he took the gun and forced Mr. Jaffe to drive to the police post. The attack was made, but in the confusion, Mr. Jaffe tried to escape. I think he most certainly killed Haum. There are fingerprints on Haum’s face and

neck. Mr. Jaffe was a very powerful man. He had only to give the boy one good shake to break his neck. I believe Mr. Jaffe was then murdered. My experience tells me that by his attack on Haum, he automatically forfeited his life.

Our enemies work like that: a life for a life. You must remember also Mr. Jaffe had 8,000 piastres on him . . ?

“What makes you say that?” Hambley snapped. “If your theory is right, he drew the money out to give to the boy. Surely the boy would have taken it before forcing Jaffe to drive to the police post?”

The Inspector inclined his head. He warned himself to be careful. This young man wasn’t quite the fool the Inspector thought he was.

“It is immaterial, Lieutenant, whether Mr. Jaffe or the boy had the money. One of them had it during the drive because there is no trace of it in the villa. I think Mr. Jaffe retained it when he was threatened with the gun. He could have said he hadn’t been able to raise such a sum. I think when the bandits found he had killed Haum and when they searched him and found the money, they killed him. The bandits would divide up the money between themselves before returning to headquarters. If they took Mr. Jaffe back alive, he would tell their leader about the money and the leader would recover it from his men and keep it for himself. It would be more convenient for the bandits for Mr. Jaffe to die. I feel certain that is what happened.”

Hambley rubbed his jaw while he stared at the Inspector.

“You sure have got this buttoned up haven’t you?” he said. “How about the suitcase and the shaving kit?”

“It was the intention of the Viet Minh to hold Mr. Jaffe to ransom. He would have been well cared for: naturally he would want his shaving things and a change of clothing. No doubt Haum had these packed ready when Mr. Jaffe returned to the villa.”

“And the girl and the cook?”

“They were waverers, Lieutenant. My converted informant told me that both of them would have become converts but for Haum’s influence. Once they knew he was dead, there was nothing to stop them leaving the Viet Minh influence. They were killed no doubt by orders from Hanoi as examples to waverers.”

Hambley took off his service cap and ran his fingers through his

sweat-damp hair. This little monkey could be right, he was thinking. It's a fantastic story but it holds together. If Jaffe was a queer we don't want it spread around. It wouldn't look so hot to have all that dirt in the newspapers.

Watching him, the Inspector saw that he had succeeded in switching the Lieutenant's attention and interest into much less dangerous channels. He would have to see the Colonel immediately and report the interview. He only hoped the Colonel would agree and support the story he had manufactured.

Hambley got to his feet. "I'll have to report this," he said.

"Of course," the Inspector said. "Colonel On-dinh-Khuc will send in a confidential report covering all these points I have raised. Your Embassy can be sure there will be no undesirable publicity given to this unfortunate affair. If it is thought necessary we can produce proof that Mr. Jaffe was a degenerate. The reward in this morning's papers has brought forward a number of people who have had associations with Mr. Jaffe and they would be prepared to testify, but I suggest it would be better to let the matter rest where it is. In the meantime you can rely on me to continue my search for Mr. Jaffe's body."

"Yeah," Hambley said. "Well, okay. Be seeing you, Inspector," and straightening his cap, he shook hands with the Inspector and left.

The Inspector stood for some moments looking through the window until he heard the jeep drive away, then he walked slowly over to the picture on the wall and regarded it. It was fortunate, he thought, that the Lieutenant hadn't thought of taking the picture down. It would have been very awkward if he had found the hole in the wall.

He stepped up to the picture and lifted it slightly, looking under it. The solid wall that met his gaze came as a shock to him. There was no sign that yesterday there had been a hole in the wall. Whoever had repaired the wall had been a highly skilled craftsman.

As he settled the picture back into place, the Inspector remembered that Lam-Than's brother was an interior decorator.

With a troubled expression in his small black eyes, he left the villa and drove rapidly back to Security Police Headquarters.

Outside the Saigon airport, Blackie Lee sat in his car and picked his teeth with a splinter of bamboo. He was waiting impatiently for the passengers from the newly-arrived aircraft from Hong Kong to pass through the Customs and Immigration barriers.

He had already caught sight of his brother, Charlie, as he had left the aircraft. It was a great weight off Blackie's mind that Charlie had answered his SOS so promptly.

Charlie Lee was five years older than his brother: a more serious and ambitious man, but not nearly so well off as Blackie.

The trouble with Charlie, Blackie had often said to Yu-lan, is he won't get down to a real job of work. He's always looking for quick, big, easy money. He is always messing around with white elephants hoping that one of his crackbrain schemes will land him into the big money. He is always spoiling his chances by chasing the gold at the foot of a rainbow when he should have opened up a dance hall in Hong Kong the way I wanted him to.

But with a job like this one — the job of getting the American to Hong Kong — Blackie could think of no one more likely to find a solution to the problem than Charlie. If Charlie couldn't dream up something, then the American was as good as dead.

He watched Charlie come out of the airport, pause and look around. He thought his brother looked a trifle thinner and a little more shabby than when he had last seen him four months ago.

Charlie spotted the American car and came over; Blackie got out and greeted him. The two men stood in the hot sun and talked for a few minutes. They inquired after each other's health, then Charlie inquired after Yu-lan who he liked. Neither of them mentioned the urgent cable Blackie had sent asking his brother to drop everything and come at once.

They got into the car and drove without haste back to the club. During the drive, Blackie asked how business was, and Charlie, with a resigned lift of his hands, admitted it wasn't good at the moment. He was having trouble with his team of rickshaw boys. Sooner or later the rickshaw would go: traffic in Hong Kong was becoming increasingly congested and was gradually edging the rickshaw off the streets. The boys knew this. They were demanding higher pay to have something

to fall back on when they could no longer work. The four girls Charlie protected were also making trouble. Since the publication of that book about a prostitute in Hong Kong, the American authorities had forbidden all American sailors in uniform to enter any of the hotels where the girls worked. This ruling had a bad effect on business and to make matters worse the girls were demanding a higher percentage.

Blackie listened, grunting in sympathy from time to time. They were still discussing Charlie's affairs as they climbed the stairs to the club where Yu-lan greeted Charlie affectionately.

Lunch was ready and the three sat down and ate through eight courses of immaculately prepared food. Little was said during the meal and when it was finished the two brothers retired to Blackie's office while Yu-lan went to her room for a siesta. Charlie sat in the most comfortable chair while Blackie sat behind his desk. He offered a cigar which Charlie accepted.

There was a short silence while Charlie lit the cigar, then he said, "There is something perhaps that I can do for you?"

Blackie immediately got down to business. With admirable clarity, he told his brother Jaffe's story. He gave his brother every scrap of information he had been able to gather without complicating the facts with his own thoughts or opinions.

Charlie lay back in the armchair and puffed at his cigar, his face expressionless. As Blackie talked, Charlie very quickly realized the danger of this thing. Up to now, neither he nor Blackie had ever touched anything really dangerous: a little opium smuggling of course; several shady currency deals; a certain amount of refugee smuggling into Hong Kong, but nothing where they could find themselves facing an execution squad, and this thing that Blackie was dabbling in could very easily end before the levelled rifles of Security Police.

Charlie had lived for many years in Saigon. He had left when the French had pulled out and President Diem had come to power. He had felt it his duty to provide a bolthole for his young brother in case of need, and he had settled in Hong Kong. But he understood the Vietnamese methods and mentality. He knew they would take the sternest measures against a Chinese if they found out he had helped a fugitive from justice to escape.

Blackie said, "The American has money. He will pay fifteen thousand U.S. dollars if we can get him out. This is an acceptable sum. I thought

five for you and ten for me would be a fair arrangement. What do you think?"

"My life is worth a lot more than five thousand U.S. dollars," Charlie said quietly.

Blackie frowned. He was disappointed. He thought his brother would have jumped at such an offer.

"What do you mean?"

"It is too dangerous," Charlie said. "I am sorry, but I cannot consider the matter for a moment; it is much too dangerous."

Blackie understood how to deal with his brother. He took from his pocket the two diamonds that Jaffe had given him.

"The American is willing to trust me," he said. "He has given me these two diamonds. He tells me they are worth a thousand U.S. dollars. They will take care of our immediate expenses. When he reaches Hong Kong, he will pay us fifteen thousand U.S. dollars." He put the two glittering diamonds on his blotter.

Charlie was an expert in all kinds of precious stones. He had once been a diamond cutter to a jeweller in Saigon, but unfortunately for him he had been caught stealing gold and that had put an end to his career in the jewellery trade.

He picked up the two diamonds and studied them. Then he took a watchmaker's glass from his pocket and screwed it into his eye and examined the stones very carefully. There was a long pause while Blackie watched him. Finally Charlie took the glass from his eye and put the diamonds back on the blotter.

As he leaned back in his armchair, he asked, "The American gave you these stones?"

"Yes."

"Where did he get them from?"

"From Hong Kong. He bought them for a girl, but changed his mind."

"How much did you say he told you they were worth?"

Blackie frowned.

“A thousand U.S. dollars.”

“It would surprise you if I told you they are worth three thousand dollars?” Charlie said.

Blackie’s eyes went dull. He slumped down in his chair while he stared at his brother.

“The American didn’t buy these diamonds in Hong Kong,” Charlie went on. “He was lying to you.”

“I don’t understand,” Blackie said. “Why did he give them to me if they are worth so much?”

“Because he doesn’t know the value of them, and that means he didn’t buy them.”

“I don’t understand,” Blackie said. “If he didn’t buy them how did he get them?”

“He stole them,” Charlie said. “This is a very strange coincidence.” He pointed to the diamonds. “Six years ago, I cut those diamonds. Myself. My mark is on them.”

“This is extraordinary,” Blackie said. “You are quite sure?”

“Of course. I can tell you who the owner was of these diamonds. Do you remember General Nguyen Van Tho?”

Blackie nodded.

“He ordered a hundred and twenty diamonds from the firm I worked for and he paid cash for them. It was a secret deal, but I learned he had gone to another dealer and bought fifty much bigger and better stones. In all he bought two million American dollars’ worth of diamonds. He used the Army funds to buy the stones. He planned to leave the country but he left it too late. He was killed by a bomb, and the diamonds were never found. I think the American has found them!”

The two men looked at each other. Blackie felt a trickle of sweat run down his face. Two million American dollars!

“Of course!” he said. “Jaffe lived in the villa belonging to the General’s woman! The General must have hidden the stones there and Jaffe found them. That’s why he murdered his houseboy! The boy

must have known Jaffe had found the diamonds!”

Charlie continued to puff at his cigar, but his mind was active. Here at last, he was thinking, is the chance I have waited for. Two million dollars! The big money! At last!

“Of course we don’t know he has the other diamonds,” Blackie said doubtfully. “He may have found only these two.”

“And killed the boy for two diamonds?” Charlie shook his head. “No: he’s found them — all of them. You can be sure of that.”

“I know where he is hiding,” Blackie said, lowering his voice. “It would be a simple matter to surprise him. I have several men who would take care of him.”

Charlie lifted his head to stare at his brother.

“Suppose you got the diamonds?” he said. “What would you do with them here?”

“We would take them to Hong Kong,” Blackie said impatiently.

“The last time I left Saigon, I was searched,” Charlie said gently.

“They would search you too. Both of us are suspect. If we were caught with the diamonds, we would disappear. You realize that, don’t you?”

“Then what are we going to do?” Blackie said.

“We are going to do what the American wants. We are going to get him out of the country. Naturally, he’ll take the diamonds with him. He will take all the risks. We will be in Hong Kong waiting for him. It is then when he arrives in Hong Kong that we take the diamonds from him. Do you agree?”

“But you said just now you wouldn’t consider the matter,” Blackie reminded him.

Charlie smiled.

“For two million American dollars, there is nothing I would not consider. You can tell him we will get him out of the country.”

“But how?”

Charlie closed his eyes.

“That is something I must think about. I am not as young as I used to be. A little sleep now would be beneficial. Will you see I am not disturbed?”

Blackie got up and went to the door. He paused. There was a worried expression in his eyes. “The American won’t part with the diamonds easily,” he said. “He is a powerfully-built man.”

Charlie settled himself comfortably in the chair. “We can’t expect to gain two million dollars without trouble,” he said. “Thank you for reminding me. I will take it into consideration.”

A few minutes after Blackie had left the office, Charlie began to snore softly.

chapter ten

I

The reward of 20,000 piastres for any information concerning Jaffe's last movements before he had been kidnapped led to chaotic scenes outside Security Headquarters.

Inspector NgocLinh had expected this to happen. He knew every shiftless coolie, pousse-pousse boy, street vendor and the like would come rushing forward with their stories, determined to earn the reward.

He knew he and his men would have to sift through hundreds of stories in the hope of gaining one little fact that might prove Jaffe was in hiding and not in the hands of the Viet Minh. The Inspector hoped too to get a lead on the girl Jaffe associated with. He gave instructions that no one was to be turned away. Everyone coming forward with information was to be interviewed.

A man who could have told him where Jaffe was hiding knew nothing about the offer of the reward for Yo-Yo had never learned to read and consequently never looked at a newspaper.

While the Inspector was probing and sifting the answers to his questions, Yo-Yo squatted outside the Paradise Club, his dirty, vicious face puckered in a perplexed frown.

He saw Charlie arrive. He had seen Charlie before and knew he lived in Hong Kong. He guessed Charlie had been sent for. He knew then for certain that something of great importance was going on. But how was he to find out what this something could be? He wondered if he should go to the taxi-dancer's home and talk to her. He might persuade her to tell him why she had visited the American, but on second thought he saw that if he failed to frighten her into talking he would be in serious trouble with Blackie. The risk was too great.

So he sat in the shade, fidgeting with his yo-yo and waited. Not ten yards from him the food vendor was reading of the reward and wondering craftily what story he could tell the police that would

convince them he was the man to receive the reward. He knew Jaffe. He had seen him often going in and out of the club, but he couldn't remember if he had seen him on Sunday night. He vaguely remembered Jaffe had sat in his car outside the club but whether that was on Saturday or Sunday, the vendor couldn't make up his mind.

He decided he might as well tell the police it was Sunday. They would be more impressed if he told them it was Sunday because, according to the newspaper, that was the day when Jaffe disappeared. As soon as the lunch hour rush was over, he would go to the police and tell them about seeing Jaffe sitting in his car. Even if he didn't get all the reward, surely they would give him something?

In the American Embassy, Lieutenant Hambley sat in his office, digging holes in his blotter with a paperknife, a thoughtful, worried expression on his face.

He was waiting for Sam Wade to come in. He had telephoned for him as soon as he had got back to his office. Wade had said he would be along in a few minutes.

When he did come in, Hambley waved him to a chair.

"I've got myself snarled up in this Jaffe affair," he said. "You knew him pretty well, didn't you?"

"I guess, but not all that well. We played golf together. He was a hell of a fine golfer. I never saw anyone hit a longer ball off the peg."

"What sort of guy was he?"

"A regular fella. I liked him."

Hambley dug more holes in his blotter.

"He wasn't a queer, was he?"

Wade's eyes opened wide.

"Are you kidding?" he asked, an edge to his voice. "Jaffe a queer? What kind of an idea is that?"

"There's a rumour going around that he was," Hambley said quietly. "It's said he had an association with his houseboy."

Wade looked disgusted. "The guy who put that rumour around wants his backside kicked. What does he expect to get out of a foul lie like

that?"

Hambley looked at Wade's indignant face with interest. "You're as sure at that?" he asked.

"You're damn right I am!" Wade said, his face flushed. "What's all this about anyway?"

Hambley told him of the Inspector's theory.

"Well, it's a lie," Wade said. "I know for a fact Jaffe had a regular girl. He never chased women. That story about why he borrowed my car is so much baloney!"

"Who was his girl, then?" Hambley asked.

"I don't know. What's it matter anyway? I do know she used to visit his place about three times a week. You know how you get to hear these things. My houseboy is always telling me who is sleeping with who. When you play golf with a guy, you get to know the kind of man he is. Jaffe was a sportsman : he was okay. I'm telling you."

"I'd like to talk to this girl of his," Hambley said. "How can I find her?"

Wade rubbed his fat jowels while he thought. "The most likely one who could tell you is that Chink I slept with on Sunday night: she's a bitch and a thief," and he gave Hambley the address.

Hambley reached for his service cap and slapped it on his head. "Well, thanks," he said, "I'll go and see this Chinese girl." He looked at his watch. It was just after half past twelve. "You have been a help."

Fifteen minutes later, he was standing outside Ann Fai Wah's front door. He rang the bell and waited. After a two-minute wait, he rang again. He was just deciding that she had gone out, when the front door opened and the girl stood in the doorway, looking at him. Her almond shaped eyes moved over him, taking in the details of his uniform before examining his face.

"Hambley: Military Police," the Lieutenant said, saluting. "May I come in for a moment?"

She stepped back and made a little flicking movement with her long, beautiful fingers. She was wearing a dove-coloured Cheongsam slit either side to halfway up her thighs. Her long shapely legs were bare

and the colour of old ivory. He could see the hard points of her breasts under the grey silk. He didn't think she had on anything under the Cheongsam.

He walked into the sitting room. On the table was the morning newspaper. By it a tray containing a cup and saucer, a coffee pot and a half-empty bottle of Remy Martin brandy.

Ann Fai Wah sat on the arm of a big leather lounging chair and rested her arm along its back. Hambley had difficulty not to stare at her leg as the split skirt parted as she sat down.

"You want something?" the girl asked, lifting painted eyebrows.

Hambley pulled himself together.

"Have you read the paper yet?"

He leaned forward and tapped the headlines that shouted of Jaffe's kidnapping.

"Hmmm."

She nodded, her slim fingers playing with a curl on the side of her neck. "Did you know Jaffe?"

She shook her head.

"He had a girlfriend: a Vietnamese taxi-dancer. I'm trying to find her. Would you know who she is and where she lives?"

"Perhaps."

Hambley shifted from one foot to the other. He found the black almond-shaped eyes extremely disconcerting. She was looking him over the way a farmer would examine a prize bull.

"What does that mean? Do you know her or don't you?" She leaned forward to pick up a cigarette. Her breasts tightened their grey silk covering. She put the cigarette between her heavily made-up lips and looked expectantly at him.

Hambley fumbled for his lighter, found it and had trouble to light it. It irritated him as he lit her cigarette to be aware that he was confused and acting like a teenager.

"Why do you want to know?" she asked, leaning back and releasing a

long stream of tobacco smoke down her nostrils.

“We’re trying to check his last movements up to the time he was kidnapped,” Hambley explained. “We think his girl could help us.”

“If she could, she would have come forward, wouldn’t she?”

“Not necessarily. She might not want to get involved.”

Ann Fai Wah picked up the newspaper and glanced at it.

“I see there’s a reward. If I told you who she is, will I get the reward?”

“You might. Security Police are paying the reward. You’d have to talk to them.”

“I don’t want to talk to them. I prefer to talk to you. If you will give me 20,000 piastres, I will tell you who she is.”

“So you know?”

Again the painted eyebrows lifted.

“Perhaps.”

“I haven’t the authority to give you the money,” Hambley said. But I’ll put your claim forward through the proper channels. Who is she?”

Ann Fai Wah shrugged her shoulders.

“I forget. I’m sorry. Is that all? You must excuse me.”

“Look, baby,” Hambley said, suddenly becoming the tough cop, “you can please yourself about this but you either tell me or Security Police. You’ll tell one of us!”

Ann Fai Wah’s expression didn’t change, but her quick shrewd mind warned her of her danger. If this American told Security Police he thought she had information, she would be taken to Headquarters and questioned. She knew what happened to people who were reluctant to talk. She had no intention of having her back lacerated with a bamboo cane.

“And the reward?”

“I told you: I’ll put in a claim for you. I don’t promise you’ll get it, but I’ll do my best for you.”

She hesitated, looking at him, then seeing he was determined, she said, “Her name is Nhan Lee Quon. I don’t know where she lives. Her uncle tells fortunes at the Tomb of Marshal Le-van-Duyet.”

“Thanks,” Hambley said. “What’s the uncle look like?”

“He is a fat man with a beard.”

Hambley picked up his cap.

“I’ll go talk to him,” he said and started towards the door.

Ann Fai Wah crushed out her cigarette and sauntered to the door with him.

“You won’t forget the reward, Lieutenant?”

“I won’t forget.”

“Perhaps you will come and see me again one evening?” He grinned at her.

“I might at that.”

She took hold of the top button of his tunic and examined it. Her face was very close to his.

“Her uncle won’t be at the temple until three o’clock,” she said. “You have plenty of time. Perhaps you would like to stay a little while now?”

Hambley removed her hand. The touch of her cool fingers made his heart beat a little faster. She certainly was attractive, he was thinking. He wanted to stay.

“Some other time, baby,” he said regretfully and he smiled. “I’ve work to do.”

He half-opened the front door, paused and looked at her again. She stared steadily back at him; her black eyes were alight with suggested promises.

Slowly he closed the door and he leaned against it. “Well, maybe I could stay awhile.”

She turned and walked slowly across the room to a door. Hambley, his eyes on her heavy, rolling hips, followed her.

II

The food vendor whose name was Cheong-Su had a long wait before he finally stood before Inspector NgocLinh, but he didn't mind the wait. The activity in the big room fascinated him and there was the suspense of wondering if someone in this long queue waiting to give information would get the reward before his turn came.

When Cheong-Su came to rest before the Inspector, he said simply and firmly that he had come to claim the reward.

"What makes you think you are going to get it?" The Inspector asked, looking at the old man, his little eyes screwed up, a bitter expression on his tired face.

"I saw the American on Sunday night," Cheong-Su said. "He was sitting in his car outside the Paradise Club. The time was after ten o'clock."

The Inspector pricked up his ears. This was the first piece of information bearing on Jaffe's last movements he had had during the five hours he had sat at the table.

"What was he doing?"

Cheong-Su blinked.

"He was sitting in his car."

"What kind of car?"

"A small red car."

"How long did he sit in the car?"

Cheong-Su blinked. "Not long."

"How long? Five minutes? Ten? A half an hour?"

"Maybe half an hour."

"Then what happened?"

“The girl came and he got out of the car,” Cheong-Su said slowly, thinking hard. “He gave her some money and she went into the club. Then she came out and they got in the car and drove away.”

The Inspector shifted his eyes. He didn’t want the food vendor to see how excited he was. “What girl?” he asked indifferently.

Cheong-Su shrugged his skinny shoulders. “I don’t know . . . a girl.”

“You don’t know who she was?”

“No.”

“Have you ever seen her before, entering and leaving the club?”

Again Cheong-Su shrugged his shoulders. “Many girls enter and leave the club. I don’t look at girls anymore.”

The Inspector could have strangled him. He said in a carefully controlled voice, “The American gave her some money and she went into the club? How long was she there?”

“Not long.”

“Ten minutes? Half an hour?”

“Maybe five minutes.”

So she was a taxi-girl, the Inspector was thinking. The American gave her money to pay Blackie Lee his fee so they could go off together. Blackie Lee had been lying when he said he knew of no regular girl.

“You are sure you haven’t seen the girl before?”

“They all look alike. I might have seen her before.”

“Is that all you have to tell me?”

Cheong-Su looked indignant. “What more do you want?” he demanded. “I have come for the reward.”

The Inspector signalled to the uniformed policeman who gave Cheong-Su a quick hard dig in the ribs with his white baton. “Move on,” he said.

Cheong-Su’s eyes bulged. “But the reward?” he spluttered. “Don’t I get anything?”

The policeman gave him a hard crack on his shin with the baton, making the old man hop and howl with pain. The waiting queue laughed delightedly to see the old man hopping and rubbing his shin. The baton fell again, this time on the old man's skinny buttocks, and holding his seat in both hands, he bolted down the room and out through the exit.

The Inspector pushed back his chair and stood up. He signed to one of his men to take over. He had to see the Colonel at once. The Colonel might think it was time to pick up Blackie Lee and bring him in for special questioning. The Inspector's face hardened when he thought of how Blackie had lied to him. He looked forward to meeting Blackie in the bleak tiled room set aside for special questioning. The fear that would be on that oily fat face, the Inspector told himself, would be worth seeing.

The subject of the Inspector's thoughts had had a siesta and now went back to his office to see what was happening to his brother. He found Charlie smoking another cigar with his feet up on Blackie's desk.

The two men looked at each other.

"Anything?" Blackie asked hopefully, sitting in his desk chair.

"I think so," Charlie said. "But we'll need more money. The money the diamonds will sell for won't be enough. There is only one way to get him out: on the opium flight."

Blackie lifted his hands helplessly. Why hadn't he thought of that? he asked himself. So simple once you did think of it. That was the difference between Charlie and himself. Charlie had more brains: there was no doubt about that and because he had more brains he had horned in on two million American dollars.

"Who is doing the run now?" he asked. He hadn't been in the opium racket now for a couple of years and he had lost touch. He knew Charlie still smuggled opium from Laos into Bangkok.

"Lee Watkins," Charlie said. "He's a newcomer. He hasn't been long in the game, but he's a good man. His father was English, his mother Chinese. He was a pilot with C.P.A. but he got fooling with an air hostess and they threw him out. He drifted into the Opium game. He's earning big money. He won't look at this job unless we pay him well."

Blackie pulled a face. "How much?"

“At least three thousand American dollars, then there will be other expenses to take care of. He will have to use a helicopter to get the American to Kratie. There’s no safe airstrip here for a plane to land. It’ll have to be a helicopter. It’ll cost around five thousand American dollars.”

Blackie whistled. “Well, if he has the diamonds, he can pay. If he hasn’t got them, then it’s no good.”

Charlie chewed his cigar.

“He has them.” He thought for a moment, then, “When are you seeing him?”

“Tomorrow night.”

“Better make it tonight. Find out if he’ll pay five thousand. If he offers you more diamonds, take them. Once he has agreed to the price, I’ll get in touch with Watkins. He’ll have to come to Phnom-Penh. I haven’t a visa for Laos.”

Blackie looked at his watch. It was twenty minutes past three.

“I’ll tell the girl to go to him at once and fix it.”

Charlie said, “He must be told you want more money. He might not bring the diamonds with him.”

Blackie nodded and went out.

In Colonel On-dinh-Khuc’s study, the Inspector was making his report.

“Blackie Lee was lying as I thought he was lying,” the Inspector said. “He knows who the girl is. I asked permission to bring this man in for special questioning.”

The Colonel pulled at his moustache. He had learned from the police at the airport that Charlie Lee had arrived. He had known Charlie in the past: he knew he was a troublemaker with influence. If Blackie were picked up, Charlie would make trouble. The Colonel knew that Charlie supplied one of the leading members of the opposition group with opium. The Colonel had no doubt that Charlie would go to this man and demand an inquiry as to why his brother had been spirited away for special questioning.

“Not yet,” he said, “but have him watched. Put two of your best men

onto him.”

“This man can tell you who the girl is,” the Inspector said. “I have questioned over two hundred people today without being able to find out who she is. Blackie Lee knows. If it is so important to find her, he can tell us.”

The Colonel stared coldly at him.

“You heard what I said — not yet. Have him watched.”

Shrugging his shoulders, the Inspector went to detail two of his men to watch Blackie: a trifle late for Blackie was by then returning from seeing Nhan, and she was hurrying to catch the five o’clock bus to Thudaumot.

Watched by Yo-Yo, Blackie parked his car and entered the club. Yo-Yo was hungry. He looked around for Cheong-Su from whom he always bought his soup. The old man wasn’t in his usual place but Yo-Yo saw him coming down the street, his oven and soup tin balanced on a bamboo pole which he carried on his shoulder.

Cheong-Su took up his position on the edge of the kerb, and after rubbing his bruised shin and groaning to himself, he blew up his charcoal fire and set the soup tin on top of it.

Yo-Yo joined him.

The old man immediately launched into a whining angry complaint about the police and how they had swindled him out of the reward. Yo-Yo had no idea what he was talking about and told him to shut up. But Cheong-Su felt his grievance too deeply to pay any attention to Yo-Yo’s lack of interest. While he stirred the soup, he continued to complain until the word “American” awoke Yo-Yo’s interest.

“What are you talking about?” he snarled. “What American? What reward?”

Cheong-Su fetched out the crumpled newspaper and showed it to Yo-Yo.

Angrily, because he hated to have to admit he couldn’t read, Yo-Yo told him to read it to him, but three customers arrived at this moment for soup and Cheong-Su left Yo-Yo to stare at the unintelligible print, seething with vicious fury at his own illiteracy.

The supper rush hour was now on and Yo-Yo had to wait. He listened to Cheong-Su's account of his unfair treatment at Security Police Headquarters as the old man recounted it over and over again to every new customer who came along.

Could the American, Yo-Yo was thinking, who he had seen at the window of the villa at Thudaumot be the man the police were inquiring about? If he was, then the girl, Nhan, and Blackie Lee were involved. Surely this might be the opportunity to blackmail Blackie for which he had been looking.

He was so absorbed in listening to Cheong-Su recount his experiences for the twentieth time that he failed to notice Blackie leave the club. The time was now twenty minutes past seven. Before setting out for Thudaumot, Blackie wanted to call on a wealthy Chinese jeweller who he was sure would buy the two diamonds Jaffe had given him. It would be a long transaction. The jeweller would try to convince Blackie the stones were of little value. Before Blackie could squeeze three thousand American dollars from the jeweller several hours would be wasted in polite but bitter haggling. Blackie was making sure he had plenty of time before his meeting with Jaffe at eleven o'clock.

When Yo-Yo finally got Cheong-Su to read him the newspaper account of Jaffe's kidnapping, he felt pretty confident that Jaffe was the American he had seen at the window. His immediate reaction was to rush around to Security Police and claim the reward, but remembering Cheong-Su's treatment, he decided first to talk to Blackie. It was possible Blackie might offer more than 20,000 piastres, but when he entered the club he found Blackie had gone.

Yu-lan who disliked Yo-Yo told him curtly to get out. Her husband, she said, wouldn't be back that night. When he wanted Yo-Yo, he would send for him.

chapter eleven

I

Blackie Lee returned to the club a little after ten o'clock. He had been as successful as he could have hoped in the sale of diamonds. After a tussle that had lasted two hours, he had finally sold the stones for two thousand nine hundred American dollars. He locked the money in his safe, then he went into the dance hall for a word with Yu-lan before setting off for Thudaumot.

As he crossed the hall to the corner table where she always sat, he noted with approval that the dance floor was crowded.

Reaching Yu-lan's table, he paused, lifting his eyebrows. Yu-lan told him that Charlie had gone to bed.

He nodded.

"Looks like a busy night. I can't get back before one o'clock."

He hadn't told Yu-lan what Charlie and he were planning to do. He didn't believe in taking his wife into his confidence, but Yu-lan knew something important was in the wind and it worried her. She knew it was useless either to ask questions or to warn Blackie. He always went his own way.

Blackie left the club and walked over to where he had parked his car.

Two Vietnamese, wearing shabby European suits, were sitting in a car parked a few yards from Blackie's car. They were smoking and talking together. One of them nudged the other as Blackie came out of the club. His companion, in the progress. He had left Ann Fai Wah's apartment after four o'clock. He felt limp and ashamed of himself. He was also irritated that the Chinese girl had set such a high value on her attractions which, from Hambley's point of view, had been extremely disappointing. There had been a sordid squabble over the present he was to give her and finally as she had begun to scream abuse at him at the top of her voice, he had parted with practically a week's pay and had hurriedly left the apartment block before her

neighbours came to inquire what the uproar was about.

He hadn't been able to find the mysterious Vietnamese girl's uncle at the Temple of Marshal Le-van-Duvet. As he couldn't speak Vietnamese, he had no means of finding out when the uncle was likely to come to the temple. The other fortunetellers at the temple stared at him, giggling with embarrassment when he had tried to make them understand who he was looking for.

By the time he got back to his office, he was hot and exhausted. He decided to shelve the affair until the following morning.

Unknown to Jaffe and Nhan, they had gained yet another day of safety. driver's seat, thumbed the starter as Blackie started his car.

They followed Blackie through the heavy traffic until he reached the Bien Hoa — Thudaumot highway. They were experienced police officers and they knew, at this time of night, there would be very little traffic on the road and Blackie would soon become aware that they were following him. They had had strict instructions from Inspector NgocLinh that Blackie was to have no suspicions that he was being watched.

The driver slowed down, letting Blackie go ahead and in a minute or so they had lost sight of his car. The driver then drove fast to the nearest police box and called the police post on the Bien Hoa highway. To the patrolman, he described Blackie's car and gave him the number. He told the patrolman to follow the car for only a short distance and then to alert all police posts on the highway to have cycle police ready to keep the car in sight until it reached its destination.

Once on the deserted highway, Blackie took the precaution to look continually in his driving mirror to make sure he wasn't being followed. He had no reason to think he might be followed, but he was taking no chances.

He didn't see the motorcycle patrolman some two hundred yards behind him for the patrolman was riding without a light.

Blackie had to stop at the Bien Hoa-Thudaumot police post which had now been repaired. The policeman in charge checked his papers, then waved him on. He watched Blackie turn to the left and head towards Thudaumot. There was already a policeman a mile ahead on a bicycle, waiting for him. The policeman went into the police post and telephoned the Thudaumot police post, warning them that Blackie was

on his way.

It was exactly at eleven o'clock when Blackie drove over the grass covered, ruined road to the temple.

The policeman who was waiting patiently a quarter of a mile away saw Blackie's headlight in the distance suddenly go out. The countryside was treeless and flat at this part of the road. The ruined tower of the temple, black and gaunt against the skyline, was the only visible landmark the policeman could see, but his sharp eyes picked out the glimmer of Blackie's sidelights as the car bumped over the potholes, and he realized Blackie had turned off the main road and was heading towards the temple.

He got on his bicycle and began to pedal fast down the road.

Blackie edged the big car through the gateway of the temple and pulled up. He saw Jaffe come out of the darkness and walk towards him. He remained in the car, waiting.

Jaffe opened the off-side door and got into the car.

"Well?" His voice was sharp. "What's been happening?"

In a few moments, Blackie thought, I'll know if he did find all the diamonds. He was aware that his hands were damp with the sweat of excitement and taking out his handkerchief he wiped them before saying, "My brother has arrived. As I had hoped, he will be able to help you. Nhan told you we need more money?"

Jaffe made an angry movement with his big hands.

"You're not getting it! I've already given you a thousand dollars! Where the hell do you think I'm going to get more money from?"

Blackie winced. "We must have another two thousand dollars," he said. "Once we have that, we can get you out."

Jaffe peered at him, "How?"

"My brother knows a pilot in Laos. He will pick you up here in a helicopter and fly you to Kratie. From Kratie, it will be a simple matter to fly you to Hong Kong. We can arrange for you to leave the day after tomorrow."

Jaffe relaxed slightly. He drew in a deep breath. This sounded like

action at last! For two days and nights he had been cooped up in the stiflingly hot little room and had been so bored he thought he would go frantic. Whatever it cost, he was determined to get away.

“Is the pilot to be trusted?” he asked and Blackie caught the eagerness in his voice.

“My brother knows him well. You can trust him, but he will want his money in advance. He will want at least three thousand dollars.”

“You pay him,” Jaffe said. “I’ll settle with you in Hong Kong.”

“I’m sorry, Mr. Jaffe, but I can’t do that,” Blackie said firmly. “If you can’t give me a further two thousand dollars, then I must withdraw my help.”

Jaffe wished he knew the value of the smaller diamonds. For all he knew, he might be throwing away a small fortune in parting with these stones, but he had no alternative. The finality in Blackie’s voice warned him that Blackie had the last word.

“I have one more diamond,” he said. “It’s worth a thousand dollars. I’ll owe you the rest.”

Blackie shook his head. “I’m sorry. I don’t like taking diamonds. I had trouble in selling the last two you gave me.”

“What did they fetch?” Jaffe demanded.

“Under a thousand dollars,” Blackie lied. “If this stone you’re now offering me is the same as the other two, the sum realized won’t be enough.”

Jaffe had brought two of the diamonds with him, each screwed up in a separate scrap of paper. He took out one of the screws of paper and gave it to Blackie.

Blackie leaned forward and put on the dashlight. He examined the stone. It seemed to him very similar to the other two stones he had sold. He was breathing a little faster now. Charlie had been right. The American had found all the diamonds.

“This will only fetch five hundred dollars,” Blackie said. “It is not nearly enough.”

A big hand reached out and caught hold of his shoulder. Fingers that

felt like steel pinchers dug into his fat flesh. He was jerked around. He stared at Jaffe, his heart giving a little kick of fright. The expression on the American's face alarmed him.

"That's all I've got," Jaffe said, speaking slowly and distinctly. "You haven't any choice now, my friend. If they catch me, I'll tell them about you. They'll trace those two diamonds back to you. You know what they'll do to you; I don't have to tell you. You're going to fix this for me or you'll go down with me."

"You're hurting me, Mr. Jaffe," Blackie said unsteadily. He could understand now how easily Jaffe had killed the houseboy. The strength in these steel fingers horrified him.

Jaffe let him go.

"You've got three diamonds out of me. When I get to Hong Kong, you'll get the rest of the money, but no more until I get there." Blackie's mind worked swiftly. With the three diamonds, he now had more than four thousand dollars in hand. It would be enough to pay the pilot and take care of Charlie's air passage. He saw that it would be dangerous to push Jaffe further. He pretended to hesitate, then he smiled, lifting his fat shoulders.

"Because I trust you, Mr. Jaffe, it's a deal," he said. "I will have to pay something out of my own pocket to make up the difference, but for you, I'll do it."

"You'd better do it," Jaffe said grimly. "Don't forget — if I go down, you go down with me."

"There'll be no question of that."

"That's up to you." There was a pause, then Jaffe went on. "What's the set-up?"

"I'll return now and fix it," Blackie said. He gently massaged his aching shoulder. "Be ready to leave the day after tomorrow. Either my brothel or I will come here at eleven and pick you up in my car. You will be taken to a place to be decided upon where the helicopter can safely land. Not here: it is too close to a police post. Is that understood?"

Jaffe nodded.

"You will bring Nhan?"

“I will bring her.”

“Okay: Thursday night here at eleven and with Nhan.”

Blackie watched the big American get out of the car, then he started the engine.

“I’m relying on you,” Jaffe said, bending to look in through the window at Blackie. “Remember what I said: we go down together.”

Blackie had a feeling of uneasiness. He suddenly wished he wasn’t mixed up in this thing. It could go wrong. He remembered his brother’s warning about a shooting squad. He felt the damp sweat of fear break out on his face.

“It will be all right,” he said. “You can rely on me.”

He backed the car through the gateway of the temple, turned it and started down the narrow road to the main road.

The policeman whose name was Din-Buong-Khun had arrived breathlessly a few minutes before, and was now lying in the long grass, his bicycle hidden close by behind a clump of young bamboo. He watched Blackie’s car turn to the right as it reached the main road and drive fast towards Saigon. Khun knew that three miles further down the road there would be another policeman waiting to pick up Blackie and follow him back to the police post. He looked towards the temple, wondering what Blackie had been doing up there in the old ruins. He wondered if he should go up there, but he had no flashlight and he knew he wouldn’t be able to see anything inside the temple. This was something he would do in the morning.

As he was about to rise to his feet, his sharp ears picked up the sound of movement. He flattened down in the grass, looking towards the temple.

Unaware that he was being watched, Jaffe walked out through the temple gateway and paused, trying to remember where he had left his bicycle. It was a dark night: a few pale stars hung in the sky, but the moon was hidden by a heavy mass of cloud.

Two more days, Jaffe was thinking, then Hong Kong! He felt confident, and sure now that he had thrown a big enough scare into Blackie to bring him and keep him to heel. He worried about the diamonds he had given Blackie. Before he paid Blackie another dollar he would get the remaining stones valued. Blackie wasn’t going to

swindle him if he could help it.

Without thinking, he took out his pack of cigarettes and lit a cigarette.

Khun watching, saw the tiny flame of the match. He could see Jaffe's massive frame outlined against the sky, and his thick lips pulled off his teeth in a grimace of excitement.

His hand slid to his revolver holster, flicked up the flap and his fingers closed on the gun butt.

It was the American: Jaffe, he told himself. There was no mistaking the man's size. The sergeant at the police post had given him his orders.

"This man is armed and dangerous. Your instructions are to shoot to kill."

The gun slid easily out of the holster. Khun lifted it and sighted along the barrel. It was a difficult shot: sixty yards at least and only a black shape to aim at. Not for the first time in his police career did Khun feel a sudden doubt if he could hit his target. He had always been an indifferent marksman, and this would be good shooting with a .38 even for a crack shot.

He began to crawl forward, sliding over the thick rough grass like a snake, his head just sufficiently raised to keep his eyes on Jaffe.

Jaffe at this moment was thinking of Nhan. By the end of the week, they would be in Hong Kong together, he told himself. They would have one of the best suites at the Peninsula Hotel. Their first meal would be at the Parisian Grill. King Prawns, he thought, smiling to himself : they had nothing like them in Saigon.

He drew in a lungful of smoke. Now where had he left his damn bicycle? He set off across the rough grass just as Khun, now within thirty yards, had once again lifted his gun.

This target was even more difficult. A moving man, his instructor had warned him, is the hardest thing in the world to hit with a revolver shot. If you have to shoot, then aim slightly ahead, but it is better to wait until your target stops moving. Khun began to slide over the grass again as Jaffe lengthened the distance between them.

Jaffe found his bicycle half hidden in the grass and he picked it up. As he straightened, Khun, seeing the bicycle and realizing in a moment or

so, he would have missed his chance, sighted hurriedly along the short barrel of the gun and fired.

Jaffe was just throwing his leg over the saddle of his bicycle when Khun fired at him. For Khun, it was a remarkably good shot, considering he was flustered and had scarcely taken aim.

Jaffe heard something zip past his face, so close he felt a burning sensation on his skin. This was immediately followed by a gunflash which seemed to come from a point only a few yards away. The bang of the gun was violently loud in the silence of the night.

Instinctively, Jaffe jerked back, lost his balance and sprawled on the grass, the bicycle entangling his legs.

Khun felt a great surge of excited triumph run through him. He had fired and he had seen Jaffe fall. He had lost sight of Jaffe in the long grass, but he was certain he had hit him. Whether he had killed him or not remained to be seen, but at least, he was sure he had hit him.

Jaffe's first reaction was to throw off the bicycle and get to his feet, but he restrained himself. Whoever had shot him was some thirty yards away from him and lying in the grass. If he moved he would be inviting a second shot and this time, the man with the gun might not miss. Very slowly and cautiously, he moved his hand to his hip pocket and pulled out his gun, sliding back the safety catch, aware that his heart was hammering and he had difficulty in breathing.

Khun remained where he was, his gun pointing in the direction of his last sight of Jaffe. A thought had dropped into his mind that had given him pause and badly shaken his confidence. Suppose, by ill chance, he thought, cold sweat starting out on his face, this big man he had fired at wasn't the American, Jaffe? He had jumped to the conclusion the big shadowy outline of the man he had seen against the skyline could have been no one else but the wanted American, but suppose he wasn't? Suppose he was some other American?

Jaffe lifted his head slowly and sighted along the rough ground. He couldn't see anything except big grass and a few shrubs. He listened intently, wondering who could have fired at him.

Khun had decided to investigate. He couldn't be certain that the man he had shot was dead. He might only be slightly wounded. If it was Jaffe, Khun knew he was armed. He didn't intend to rise up and present a target of himself.

Jaffe suddenly saw him. The white uniform showed up against the blackness of the grass. The man was creeping forward like a snake, and he wasn't more than fifteen yards from Jaffe.

Khun also spotted Jaffe. His khaki shirt was also visible against the dark grass. Khun stopped moving and stared at the dim outline of the fallen man, his gun thrust forward, sweat trickling down his face while he watched for the slightest movement.

Jaffe could just make out the gun in Khun's hand. He guessed rather than saw it was pointing at him.

He doesn't know if I am alive or not, Jaffe thought, trying to control the panic that gripped him. He'll probably shoot again before coming any closer. If I make the slightest movement, he'll fire. Even if I don't he could still shoot.

He was holding his gun down by his side. He would have to lift it and aim. By lying flat in the grass, Khun had made himself an almost impossible target. Jaffe told himself he couldn't afford to miss. He began to lift the gun, inch by inch.

Khun lay in the grass, staring at the man lying some fifteen yards in front of him. He didn't know what to do. He wanted to shoot at the dim outline, and yet his mind kept warning him that if this wasn't Jaffe, he might be tried for murder.

He lay there, trying to make up his mind. The minutes ticked by. Jaffe watched him. He had got his gun up and it was levelled in the direction of the peak cap Jaffe could just make out against the dark background, but it was still too tricky a shot. So he waited.

After what seemed to be an eternity and was actually five minutes, Khun began to relax. The man was dead, he told himself. No one badly wounded could lie so still for so long. He had to see if it was Jaffe.

Spurred on by the feeling of panic, he rose to his knees, then straightened up and began to walk cautiously towards the fallen man.

Jaffe raised the barrel of his gun, keeping the gun down by his side so the approaching man couldn't see it against the skyline, and when Khun was within five yards of him, he gently squeezed the trigger.

The firing pin came down on the cap, making a loud click, but the gun didn't fire. The three-year old cartridge had betrayed Jaffe in his most

urgent need.

Khun heard the sound and jumped aside, his breath whistling out of his open mouth. He saw a vast shape rise off the ground and come towards him in a lunging dive and he fired blindly.

The bullet scraped Jaffe's arm. He felt the burning pain but it didn't check his dive. Khun had no chance to fire directly at him again. Jaffe's arms encircled his bony legs and his shoulder thudded into his groin. Khun felt as if he had been charged by a bull. He felt himself being flung up in the air and he pulled the trigger of his gun, the bullet whizzing into the night sky, the flash of the gun momentarily blinding Jaffe.

The two men crashed down on the grass. The gun flew out of Khun's hand. He screamed out in terror as he felt an agonizing pain sweep through him. Jaffe struck him on the side of his head with his clenched fist and the little man, hopelessly outmatched, jerked upwards and then fell back limply.

Jaffe knelt over him, breathing heavily. His hands rested lightly on Khun's throat, ready to nip back a second scream. Khun mumbled something in Vietnamese which Jaffe couldn't understand. Then from his throat came a curious dry rattling sound, like the rustle of dry leaves. The sound made Jaffe's hair stand on end. Khun's head flopped sideways, and Jaffe knew he was dead.

He remained kneeling over the little man for some minutes too stunned to move, then finally he made an effort and stood up.

Another one dead! he thought. These little people are as brittle as matchsticks. I guess I must have broken his spine. Well, at least, this was in self defence. If I hadn't gone for him, he would have killed me.

Now what was he going to do? he asked himself. If they found this little man's body here, they might set a trap at the temple. Blackie was coming back the day after tomorrow. He would have to move him.

Walking stiffly, his mind jumping with alarm, he went back to his bicycle. He groped around for several seconds before he found his gun. He shoved it into his hip pocket. The gun was no good, he told himself. It had been just luck that it had fired the first time. He couldn't trust it any more.

He straightened his bicycle and wheeled it over to where Khun lay. Without much trouble, he hoisted the dead man over his shoulder,

then wheeling his machine, he started across the rough grass towards the main road.

Just before he reached the road, he came upon Khun's bicycle. He couldn't leave it where it was. Balancing the dead man over his shoulder, he started off again, wheeling the two machines, holding them in either hand. When he reached the road, he got on his bicycle and steering the other, he pedalled off down the road.

I only need to run into someone, he thought. That's all it needs to round off a hell of a lousy night.

But he didn't run into anyone. And after riding four or five miles, he dumped Khun's body in a ditch and the bicycle on top of him.

Before leaving, he took Khun's gun and cartridge belt.

As he rode back to Thudaumot, he hoped the police would think the little man's death was yet another Viet Minh outrage.

II

Blackie Lee arrived back at the club at twenty minutes to one a.m. He parked his car, got out and stood for a moment breathing in the hot used-up air.

There was no movement in the street. Three rickshaws stood nearby along the kerb. The three rickshaw boys were sleeping in their vehicles. The neon lights that plastered the front of the club were out. They went out every night exactly at twelve. Looking up at the dark building, Blackie smiled to himself. In Hong Kong those lights would blaze until the early hours of the morning. There was no crippling curfew in Hong Kong.

He started towards the club, then paused as he saw a shadowy figure rise up out of a dark doorway and come towards him. He recognized the hard Mexican hat that Yo-Yo always wore and he frowned impatiently.

Yo-Yo sidled up to him."

"Good evening, Mr. Blackie," he said. "I wanted to speak to you."

“Some other time,” Blackie said curtly. “It’s late. See me tomorrow,” and he walked across to the entrance of the club and fumbled in his pocket for his keys.

Yo-Yo followed him.

“It won’t wait until tomorrow, Mr. Blackie. I wanted your advice. It’s about the American, Jaffe.”

Blackie restrained a start of alarm with an effort. His agile mind worked swiftly. What a fool he had been! He had forgotten he had sent Yo-Yo to follow Nhan. This little rat knew where Jaffe was hiding! He must have read about the reward in the newspapers.

“Jaffe?” he said, looking over his shoulder at Yo-Yo, his fat face expressionless. “Who’s Jaffe?”

“The American who was kidnapped, Mr. Blackie,” Yo-Yo said, a derisive sneer in his voice.

Blackie hesitated, then he said, “You’d better come up,” and he waved Yo-Yo to go on ahead.

As Blackie followed him up the stairs, his elation left him. If this little rat has put two and two together, he thought, and made it four, he can ruin the whole of our plans.

There was only one light on in the dance hall. It was over the cash desk where Yu-Ian was checking the cash. The desk was covered with money. She glanced up as the two men came in. Her head jerked up when she saw Yo-Yo.

Blackie didn’t say anything to her. He continued across the floor to his office, followed by Yo-Yo who had paused for a moment to stare at the money on the desk.

In his office, Blackie sat down behind his desk. Yo-Yo stood in front of the desk, chewing on the thin leather strap that hung from his hat.

“Well? What is it?” Blackie said.

“They’re offering 20,000 piastres for information about the American,” Yo-Yo said. “I know he hasn’t been kidnapped and I know where he is. I thought I’d better talk to you first before I claim the reward.”

“What makes you think it’s anything to do with me?” Yo-Yo picked at a food stain on his coat.

“Isn’t it?” he said, not looking at Blackie. “He’s the man I saw in the villa at Thudaumot. The man Nhan visited.”

“How do you know?”

Yo-Yo looked up and his thick lips parted in a sneering grin.

“I know, Mr. Blackie. I thought I’d come to you first. You’ve always been good to me. I didn’t want to get you into any trouble.”

Blackie breathed heavily through his wide nostrils. He felt a cold clutch of fear at his heart, but his face remained expressionless.

“Why should I get into trouble?”

Yo-Yo shrugged his shoulders. He didn’t say anything.

To give himself time to think, Blackie lit a cigarette. As he flicked out the match, he said, “It would be better if you didn’t go to the police. I’m thinking of the girl. I don’t let any of my girls get into trouble if I can help it.”

Yo-Yo’s grin widened.

“I know that, Mr. Blackie.”

“Well, okay. You keep away from the police. Just keep quiet about this. Police informers aren’t popular around here.”

Yo-Yo nodded.

There was a pause, then Blackie went on, “It’s time you settled down to a job of work. Come and see me tomorrow. I’ll find something for you: something good,” and he made a little flicking movement of dismissal.

Yo-Yo didn’t move.

“How about the reward, Mr. Blackie?”

I’ll have to give him the money, Blackie thought, but it won’t stop there. As soon as he has spent it, he’ll be back for more. I’ve got this little rat on my back now.

"The police won't pay you," he said. "They'll listen to you, but they won't pay you. I shouldn't have to tell you that."

"I think they would, Mr. Blackie," Yo-Yo said and a hard note came into his voice. "I want 20,000 piastres."

Blackie looked at him for a long moment, then he got to his feet.

"Wait here," he said, "and keep your hands off my things."

He went out closing the door after him. He crossed to a door leading to his living quarters at the back of the club, ignoring Yu-lan who was looking anxiously at him from across the hall. He went to Charlie's bedroom and entered.

There was a flickering nightlight under a large photograph of Blackie's and Charlie's father that stood on a shelf on the wall. The nightlight provided enough light for

Blackie to see his brother sleeping in the bunk across the room.

As Blackie shut the door, Charlie opened his eyes and sat up.

"What is it?" Charlie asked.

Quietly Blackie told him of his meeting with Jaffe.

"He has the diamonds," he said. "He has given me one more."

Charlie held out his hand and Blackie gave the screw of paper containing the diamond. Charlie examined the stone and nodded.

"This is another of mine," he said. "He agrees to the price?"

Yes."

"I fly to Phnom-Penh tomorrow morning."

"There is a complication," Blackie said and told Charlie about Yo-Yo.

"These things happen," Charlie said philosophically. "You must pay him. He'll come back for more, of course. When we have the diamonds we may have to do something about him, but not until we have the diamonds."

"That's what I thought. All right, I'll pay him."

“Do you think he’ll go to the police after you have paid him? He might be tempted to try for the reward as well.”

“No, he won’t do that,” Blackie said. “The police know too much about him. I don’t think they would give him anything: he knows that as well as I do.”

Charlie nodded. Then pay him.”

chapter twelve

I

Nhan had passed a bad night. She had had a dream that had terrified her. As soon as she had got her three brothers off to school and before her uncle had got out of bed, she took a *pousse-pousse* to the Tomb of Marshal Le-van-Duyet. At the entrance she bought an assortment of vegetables and fruit as gift offerings. She entered the Temple and laid her gifts among the other gifts already on the long table.

She knelt and prayed for some time, and then calmer in mind, she bought two candles, lit them and fixed them to the already overcrowded candle rack.

Then kneeling, she picked up a quiver containing a number of strips of thin wood, each strip bearing a number. Very gently and carefully she began to shake the quiver in both hands until one strip of wood toppled out and fell on the stone floor. She looked at the number and noted it was 16. She went over to a numbered rack on the wall and drew from a pigeonhole numbered 16 a strip of pink paper.

She took this strip of paper to an old man who was sitting at the entrance to the tomb. He was one of the five fortunetellers attached to the tomb. He read what was printed on the pink paper, then he stared at Nhan for some minutes. He was the best as well as the oldest fortuneteller at the Tomb and Nhan had great faith in him.

He told her that she must be very careful what she did during the next two days. These two days, he said, were the most critical of her life. After the two days, she would have no need of fear, but it would be better for her to return home and pray and keep on praying until the two days had elapsed.

Instead of returning home, Nhan caught the nine o'clock bus to Thudaumot. She felt an urgent need to be with Steve to feel his arms around her. He could, she felt, give her more comfort and more hope than prayer.

While the bus was leaving the Central Market for Thudaumot,

Lieutenant Hambley was arriving at his office. He found on his desk a number of files and a request for a comprehensive report on the pilfering of stores belonging to the Embassy. The report and the files would keep him fully occupied for at least two days, and as he got down to work, he remembered that he was to have gone to the Tomb of Marshal Le-van Duyet to talk to Nhan Lee Quon's uncle.

Well, I can't do everything, he told himself. I'll give her name to NgocLinh and he can handle it.

It wasn't until eleven o'clock when his secretary brought him a cup of coffee that he paused in his work to telephone the Inspector.

"Your theory that Jaffe was a degenerate is so much baloney," Hambley said when the Inspector came on the line. "I have talked to his friends and there's no evidence at all that he was queer or that he chased girls. He had a regular girl. You'd better talk to her. She'll tell you there was nothing wrong with the guy."

The Inspector, listening, half closed his eyes with exasperation.

"If I could find the girl, Lieutenant," he said, controlling his irritation, "I would most certainly talk to her, but I don't know who she is and I can't find out who she is."

Hambley grinned to himself.

"You surprise me, Inspector. I had no trouble finding out who she is. I got her name from that Chinese tart you found Wade with. As easy as that."

The Inspector leaned forward, gripping the telephone. "Who is she?"

"She's a taxi-dancer at the Paradise Club," Hambley said. "Her name's Nhan Lee Quon. I don't know where she lives, but I do know her uncle is a fortuneteller at Marshal Levan-Duyet's tomb. He'll tell you where to find her."

The Inspector drew in a long breath.

"Thank you, Lieutenant, I will act on your suggestion," and he hung up.

For a long moment he sat still, staring in front of him, then he picked up the telephone and called Colonel On-dinh-Khuc. He told him he now knew who Jaffe's girl was.

"I will question her myself," the Colonel said, a grating note in his voice. "Arrest her quietly. Bring her to me immediately."

It didn't take the Inspector long to find Nhan's address. A register of all the taxi-dancers was kept at headquarters. The Inspector took two plainclothes men with him and drove in his car to Nhan's home. Leaving the car at the corner of the street, he walked with one of his men to the apartment block.

Nhan's mother came to the door.

Her daughter was out, she told the Inspector. She didn't know where she had gone. She would be back at midday or failing this, then she was certain to be back at six.

The Inspector left his man at the apartment. He told him to wait for Nhan to arrive and that her mother was not to leave the apartment on any pretext until her daughter did arrive.

When the Inspector had gone, his man sat on the bench near the door and lit a cigarette. Nhan's mother squatted on the floor looking at the man in terror. After a while the man got bored with smoking. He locked the door and then began to examine the contents of the apartment, opening and shutting cupboards, opening drawers and turning over their contents while Nhan's mother continued to watch him.

Jaffe was surprised and pleased when his room door opened and Nhan came in. He thought she looked tired and he could tell by her kiss that she was nervous about something. He led her to the bed and sat on it, pulling her down beside him, his arm round her. He told her of his meeting with Blackie. He didn't mention the policeman.

"We leave tomorrow night," he said. The following morning we will be in Hong Kong."

Nhan hesitated before saying, "Could we wait for two days, Steve? It would be better. I consulted the Oracle this morning and the next two days are very bad for me. Please wait. In two days' time it will be all right." She looked anxiously at him expecting him to be angry and impatient with her, but instead he grinned at her.

"Now look, Nhan, if you're going to become an American citizen you've got to stop being superstitious, and that's all this nonsense is: superstition. Oracles are all very well for a little Vietnamese taxi-dancer, but not for an American citizen.

"I understand," Nhan said helplessly. She wanted so much to gain Steve's approval and to make the right impression. She was suddenly sure that she would never see Hong Kong. Hadn't the fortuneteller told her the next two days were the most critical days of her life? "It isn't possible to wait?"

"No. Everything is arranged," Jaffe said. "Now don't worry about it. It's going to be all right." He lay back across the bed, pulling her with him and he began to kiss her.

Nhan closed her eyes and tried to relax under his caresses, but her mind was darting with fear the way a trapped mouse will dart to escape the paw of a cat.

"Look, why not stay here with me?" Jaffe said. "Why go back to Saigon? We'll leave here tomorrow night. Will you stay?"

He lifted himself up on his arm and leaned over her, tracing his finger gently down the side of her nose, touching her lips and moving up along her jawbone as he looked at her.

"I can't stay," she said, shaking her head. "I must prepare my mother for my going away. There are many things yet for me to do. I must pack. I couldn't go without saying goodbye to my brothers."

Families! Jaffe thought irritably. They were a ball and chain on the leg of a man who is trying to run. They were a blanket that stifled impulse.

He was glad he had no family: no mother to prepare for his going away: no brothers to say goodbye to.

His irritation showed on his face as he shrugged his shoulder.

"Well, all right. It's your family. Blackie will come to your apartment at ten tomorrow night. He will bring you to me. It's all arranged."

"I will be ready," Nhan said.

"We will meet at the ruined temple at eleven then he is driving us somewhere where the helicopter can land. Once we get to Kratie, we'll be safe."

Because of the growing presentiment of danger that persisted in haunting her mind, she took Jaffe's face gently in her hands, smiling at him and she said, "Could we make a little love together, Steve?"

Now . . . It will be for the last time.” She paused, then went on, “before we reach Hong Kong.”

He looked down at her, puzzled.

“You’re still scared, aren’t you?” he said as he began to undo her tunic. “You mustn’t be scared. It’s going to work out all right. I know it is. You must trust me.”

She gave herself to him as she had never given herself to him before. It was as if she were trying desperately to express the love she felt for him so that it would make an indelible mark on his mind; something he would always remember her by in the years ahead when he would be living without her.

II

While Nhan was in the bus going to Thudaumot and Lieutenant Hambley was talking to Inspector NgocLinh on the telephone, Blackie was driving his brother to the Saigon airport.

Charlie had been fortunate to get a scat on the Dakota going to Phnom-Penh at ten o’clock. He had already sent a telegram to Lee Watkins, the pilot on the Opium run, asking him to meet him at Phnom Penh airport.

As the big American car drove along the main road, both brothers were silent, their minds active.

Blackie said suddenly, “Watkins should know a safe place to make his landing. It must be close to Thudaumot. I don’t want a long drive with Jaffe: it’s too risky.”

Charlie nodded.

“I’ll arrange that.” He paused as Blackie slowed down to edge past two buffalo being led along the road, then as Blackie accelerated, he went on, “It’s time we decided how we are to get the diamonds from the American when he leaves here.”

“I’ve been thinking about that,” Blackie said. “I don’t think it would be safe to let him get to Hong Kong with the diamonds. The time to

take them from him is when he arrives in Kratie.”

Charlie thought about this. He realized Blackie was right. It would be almost impossible to get the diamonds from Jaffe in Hong Kong, but in Kratie, it would be fairly simple

“Yes. Once the diamonds are out of Vietnam, it doesn’t matter. I could hire some men to take care of him after I have talked to Watkins.”

Blackie had been brooding over this problem during the early hours of the morning. He had come to a certain conclusion. He hesitated to tell his brother, but after a long pause, he forced himself to say, “We can’t trust any outsider in this, Charlie. They might steal the diamonds. I suggest you go with Jaffe to Kratie.” Again he paused, then, “You will have to get the diamonds from him.”

Charlie flinched.

“You are younger and stronger, Blackie,” he said. “I think you should do it.”

“I have thought about that too,” Blackie said, “but there are too many complications. How would I get back? We couldn’t expect Watkins to make a return trip. I have no Cambodian visa whereas you have. I would have to go on to Hong Kong with the diamonds. No, I’m sorry, Charlie, but you will have to do it.”

“This American is dangerous,” Charlie said, shifting uneasily. “I might not be able to get the diamonds from him.”

“I have also thought of that,” Blackie said. “You mustn’t take any chances with him. The way I see it is this: you will tell the American he is to be landed just outside Kratie. There will be a car waiting to take him to the airfield for his flight to Hong Kong. You will arrange with Watkins to land at some lonely place. You will also arrange for a car to be there to meet you. You will need a gun with a silencer. When Watkins has gone, you will go with Jaffe to where the car is waiting. It should be on the road, some little distance from your landing place. You will arrange it so Jaffe walks ahead of you. On the way you will shoot him. We can’t take any chances, Charlie. There’re two million dollars involved. If you held him up and tried to get the diamonds from him, he might outsmart you. I don’t like this plan very much, but we have no alternative. When he is dead, you will take the diamonds and go to the car. You will tell the driver your passenger was unable to come.”

Charlie considered what his brother had just said. Murder was no stranger to him. Fifteen years ago he had murdered a woman who had been blackmailing him. He had had no compunction about killing her. He had gone to her apartment late one night on the pretext of paying her her monthly blackmail. He had hit her on the back of the head, stripped her and drowned her in the bath. It was thought she had slipped, hit her head on the bath taps and had drowned herself.

The idea of murdering Jaffe didn't disturb Charlie. There was nothing he wouldn't do to lay his hands on two million dollars, but he wasn't the same man as he had been fifteen years ago. His nerves weren't as steady. He flinched at the idea of walking through a dark jungle with a man as dangerous as Jaffe. If Jaffe suspected what was going to happen and got in the first shot, the chances were he wouldn't miss. Charlie had no wish to die. He would have liked a safer plan.

"We are forgetting the girl," he said. "She'll be there too."

"I hadn't forgotten her," Blackie said. He deliberately hadn't mentioned Nhan. He wanted his brother to get used to the idea of one murder first. "She'll have to go too. I'm sorry, Charlie, but I don't think the American will leave if the girl doesn't go with him. I did think I would fix it so she didn't join him, but on second thoughts, it's too risky. He might refuse to go if she wasn't with him. She'll have to be wiped out too."

Two murders! Charlie thought, and he felt sweat start out on his body.

He visualized the scene. Jaffe and the girl walking ahead; he following them. He would draw the gun and he would shoot Jaffe in the back. Jaffe would fall. He might not be killed, but at least he would be harmless. What would the girl do? She might run away. It would be dark. If she started to run before he could swing the gun in her direction, she could get away. Then he would be in trouble.

As if he were reading his thoughts, Blackie said gently, "She is in love with the American. When he falls, she will go to him. It'll be an easy second shot, Charlie."

"You seem to have thought of everything," Charlie said, a note of bitterness coming into his voice. "There was a time when I did the thinking for the family."

Blackie didn't say anything. Everything depended now on whether Charlie would do this thing. He himself flinched from murder. He knew Charlie had one murder on his hands already. He knew he could

never bring himself to shoot Jaffe and Nhan. That was another difference between Charlie and himself: there was a ruthless streak in Charlie that Blackie envied.

They were within sight of the airport now.

"The arrangement," Charlie said, "is too one-sided. You take no risks, Blackie. I have to do all the work and take all the risks. When the bodies are found, Watkins will guess I killed them. He might try to blackmail me."

"You in your turn can blackmail him," Blackie said. "He could get ten years for running opium into Bangkok. You don't have to worry about Watkins."

"There's the driver of the car."

"Arrange with Watkins to use one of his men. You won't have to worry about him."

Charlie shrugged. He was ready to accept the plan, but he was putting up a show of opposition to open the way to strike a better bargain.

"If I am to do all this," he said, "we must have a new financial settlement. You can't expect to have half the money when you take no risks. I think I should have three-quarters and you a quarter."

Blackie had been expecting his brother to ask for more money, but three-quarters was, of course, absurd.

"We are going to be partners, Charlie," he said. "We want to use the money to start a dance club in Hong Kong, profitable to both of us. I agree you should have more money, but three-quarters is unreasonable. I suggest you should have fifty thousand dollars from the capital, then the rest to be split evenly."

"Let us say a hundred thousand," Charlie said, "and a 60 — 40 share in the profits of the club."

Blackie hesitated, then shrugged his shoulders. He would have demanded even better terms than these if he had to do what Charlie was going to do.

"All right," he said. "I agree to that."

Charlie nodded. He was satisfied.

As Blackie pulled up at the Departure entrance of the airport, Charlie said, "I will be back tomorrow morning. Don't forget the gun."

Blackie didn't wait to see him off. He drove back to Saigon, unaware that he had been followed to the airport and was now being followed on his return by the two Security Police detectives. They saw Blackie enter the club, then one of them went off to telephone to the Inspector while the other waited in the car which he had parked a few yards from the entrance of the club.

The detective didn't notice Yo-Yo who squatted under a tree, flicking his toy up and down on its string while he watched the detective.

Yo-Yo had seen the two men drive off after Blackie and his brother. He had seen Blackie return alone, still followed by the two detectives. The situation interested him, and after considering it for some minutes, he straightened up and walked over to the club. He went in, climbed the stairs and entered the dance hall.

He crossed the dance floor and went into Blackie's office without knocking. He shut the door and leaned against it.

Blackie was sipping from a glass of tea. He looked up. His face became expressionless when he saw Yo-Yo.

"What is it?"

"I have some information to sell," Yo-Yo said. "It'll cost you five thousand piastres, but it's cheap at the price."

"What information?"

"I'll have the money first."

"You can get out," Blackie said, putting down his glass of tea, "before I throw you out."

Yo-Yo giggled. "It's to do with the police and you, Mr. Blackie. It's important."

Blackie felt a sudden chill around his heart. He didn't hesitate for long. He took out his wallet and counted out five thousand piastres and threw them across the desk at Yo-Yo.

"What is it?"

Yo-Yo picked up the notes. "Two Security Police detectives are

following you,” he said. “They followed you when you left this morning with Mr. Charlie. They were following you when you returned. They are sitting outside now in their car: the black Citroen.”

Blackie sat for some moments staring at Yo-Yo, then with a visible effort, he said, “The next time you come in here knock on the door. Now get out.”

Yo-Yo looked at the money in his dirty hand and then he winked at Blackie.

“Some have good luck, some bad. I’m sorry for you, Mr. Blackie,” and he went out.

As soon as the door had shut, Blackie got quickly to his feet and went to the window. Cautiously, he peered through the closet shutters. He could see the Citroen down in the street. He couldn’t see who was sitting in it, but whoever it was was smoking. He could see a spiral of tobacco smoke drifting out of the open window of the car.

What did it mean? he asked himself. Why were they watching him? Did they suspect he was in touch with Jaffe? Or were they watching him in the hope he would lead them to Nhan? Or was it something that had nothing to do with Jaffe?

He moved away from the window, taking out his handkerchief to wipe his sweating face. Cold panic crawled up his spine. If it hadn’t been for that little rat, Yo-Yo, he would have gone out in another ten minutes to collect the gun and the silencer. If they had caught him with that, he would have gone away for two years.

He went slowly over to his desk and sat down. He had better remain in his office, he told himself. Yu-lan could collect the gun. He thought with envy of Charlie, safe in the Dakota taking him to Phnom-Penh. Should he warn Charlie the police were on the watch? He hesitated, then decided to wait a little while. Maybe this had nothing to do with Jaffe. Maybe someone had talked about the little currency deal he had engineered a couple of weeks ago. Perhaps that was why the police were watching him.

He got up and went to a cupboard and poured himself out a stiff drink of whisky, then he returned to his desk and wrote a hurried note. He took from his wallet several notes which he put in the envelope together with the letter he had written, sealed the envelope and addressed it.

Then he went out into the dance hall where Yu-lan was arranging flowers.

“Take this letter to Fat Wo,” Blackie said to her. “Take shopping basket with you. Buy some fruit and vegetables. Fat Wo will give you a parcel. Put the parcel under the fruit and vegetables and then come back here.”

“What is in the parcel?” Yu-lan asked, her eyes anxious.

“It is no affair of yours,” Blackie said. “Go at once. The matter is very urgent.”

Yu-lan hesitated, then seeing he was in no mood to tolerate disobedience, she went away to fetch the shopping basket.

Blackie returned to his office. He finished the whisky and felt less nervous. He stood at the window watching Yu-lan as she walked briskly down the street to Fat Wo’s restaurant. No one followed her. The man in the Citroen continued to smoke. Blackie waited by the window. Twenty minutes later, he saw Yu-lan returning, the shopping basket loaded with vegetables. He met her at the door of the club as she came in.

“Did you get it?” he asked.

She set down the basket, lifted out some of the vegetables and hauled out a parcel securely wrapped in brown paper and tied with string.

“What is happening?” she asked. “I am worried. You are planning something. May I not know?”

He took the parcel.

“No,” he said. “This is a matter for men.”

He went into his office, shut and bolted the door and then opened the parcel. The .38 automatic with its long silencer pleased him. He checked the magazine, then going to his safe, he locked the gun away.

Two more days, he thought, before we get the diamonds. It seemed an eternity to have to wait. He went to the window again and peered through the shutters. The Citroen was still there.

While he stood watching the car and wondering what this police attention could mean, Inspector NgocLinh was standing before Colonel

On-dinh-Khuc's desk, making a report about the dead policeman found in a ditch on the Thudaumot road.

The time was half past three. The policeman's body had only just been found. He had been missing since he had left the police post at ten thirty the previous evening. He had been detailed to watch Blackie Lee's car. The Inspector couldn't make up his mind whether bandits had killed the policeman or if Jaffe had killed him.

The Colonel wasn't interested in the dead policeman. During the morning, he had had a disturbing conversation with Lam-Than. Lam-Than had warned him his sands were now rapidly running out. One of Lam-Than's spies at the Presidency had told Lam-Than that the group opposing the Colonel had finally convinced the President to take action against him. By the end of the week he would no longer be Head of Security Police. He would have been dismissed instantly only the man who was to succeed him was in Paris, and until he returned in three days, no action against the Colonel could be taken.

Three days! the Colonel was thinking as he half-listened to the Inspector's report. If this rumour were true he had only three more days in which to lay his hands on the diamonds and get out of the country.

"Where is this taxi-dancer?" he said. "How much longer do I have to wait?"

"She will return to her home at six," the Inspector said. "At ten minutes past six, sir, she will be in this room."

The Colonel stared at him, his little eyes glittering.

"I will hold you to that statement," he said. "If she is not here by ten minutes past six, you will regret having been born."

There was a pause, then the Inspector said, "The man, Blackie Lee, took his brother to the airport this morning. The brother flew to Phom Penh. He has a return ticket and arrives back here tomorrow morning. These two men know something about Jaffe. I respectfully suggest they should now be arrested and questioned.

The Colonel shook his head. "Not yet," he said. "Give me the girl. She will tell me what I want to know. Just give me the girl."

chapter thirteen

I

Nhan woke from a sound and dreamless sleep. She lay without moving, looking up at the wooden ceiling as she listened to the faint sounds of passing people and an occasional car in the road outside the villa.

The little room was very hot. She felt drowsy and relaxed. She turned her head to look at Steve sleeping beside her. Then moving gently so as not to wake him, she half sat up to look at his wristwatch lying on the table beside her. The time was four o'clock. She lay back with a contented sigh.

The bus to Saigon left at fifteen minutes past five. It would get her to the Central Market at five-to-six. She would be home by six in time to prepare supper for her brothers.

For the moment her fears had drained out of her. Jaffe's skilful lovemaking had satisfied her body and relaxed her mind.

She stretched her long naked legs with another sigh of content and she put her hands over her small breasts, pressing her elbows into her tiny waist.

Steve stirred. He opened his eyes, blinked, then seeing her watching him, he smiled.

"Hello, Mrs. Jaffe," he said and dropped his hand onto her. "What's the time?"

She looked adoringly at him. He couldn't have said anything nicer to her than that simple "Hello, Mrs. Jaffe."

"It's only four."

He slid his arm under her shoulders and pulled her to him.

"How glad I'll be to get out of here," he said, absently stroking her

flank. "Thirty-one more hours. It's damned funny really how in a few hours one's whole life can change. In thirty-one hours you and I will be in a helicopter. Have you ever been in a helicopter?"

"No."

"Nor have I. This will be the first of many new experiences we are going to share together." He saw the worried expression come into her eyes and he shook his head, smiling at her. "The first thing we'll do when we get to Hong Kong is to find a lawyer to get your family fixed. You're worrying about them, aren't you?"

"A little. They will be very sad when I leave them."

"They'll get over it." He lay quiet for some moments, then, "You won't change your mind and stay here with me? Your grandfather can go and tell your family you're leaving with me to get married. I'll give him the money for a taxi. Come on, Nhan, change your mind. Let's get to know each other. We shall have thirty-one hours in this little room to talk. We should know each other pretty well after thirty-one hours' talking shouldn't we?"

"Yes."

She was tempted to stay. It was strange, she thought, when I am with him, I'm not frightened. With him, holding me, I can really believe that I shall go to Hong Kong with him and I shall stay at the best hotel and have a car of my own and a necklace of pearls as he promised. Not that I want anything really except him.

She wrestled with temptation to stay. Her three brothers didn't like her grandfather. She never knew quite why. It wouldn't do for him to go to them and tell them she was leaving Saigon and wouldn't see them for a long time. They relied on her. They would miss her so much. It was her duty to explain why she was leaving them herself.

"I must go, Steve," she said, looking anxiously at him. "I want to stay, but as I am leaving them and going to live with you, it wouldn't be right not to tell them myself."

"I guess that's right." Jaffe bent and kissed her. "You're a funny kid, Nhan. I admire you for being able to feel that way. I couldn't: it's not in me."

"You are very kind."

“No, I’m not,” Jaffe said, frowning. “I’m in love with you. I wasn’t kind even to you before I learned to love you. Now it’s easy to be kind to you, but not to anyone else.” He got off the bed and slipped on his shorts, then crossing to his canvas holdall, lying on the floor, he opened it and took out the typewriter ribbon container and came back to her. “Lie still,” he said and opening the container, he gently spilled the diamonds into the little hollow between her breasts.

She lifted her head and looked at the diamonds sparkling like fireflies on her brown skin. They felt cold, and she suppressed a shiver as Jaffe very carefully moved them with his fingers, making a little pattern with them.

“They’re terrific, aren’t they?” he said. “Look at them! I’ll be sorry to sell them. I’ll pick the best of them and I’ll have it mounted on a ring for you.”

The feel of the diamonds against her skin gave her the same feeling of horror she once had when, lying in the long grass, a snake had slid over her naked legs. Then, she had sprung to her feet, screaming. Now, seeing the pleasure the diamonds lying between her breasts gave him, she fought down the horror and controlled the impulse to sweep them off her body and scream.

But she couldn’t hide the sudden tensing of her muscles and Jaffe, puzzled, scooped up the diamonds and put them back into the tin.

“I wonder if I’ll ever learn to understand you, Nhan,” he said. “One second you’re happy and relaxed, the next you’re scared out of your wits. I’d like to know what goes on in that funny mind of yours.”

She rubbed her hand between her breasts as if trying to get rid of the feel of the diamonds. “I wonder sometimes what goes on in your mind too, Steve.”

“I guess.” He looked at the diamonds before putting the lid on the tin. “These stones give me more pleasure than anything else in the world — except you.”

“I’m glad.”

She slid off the bed. She couldn’t bear to talk about the diamonds a moment longer. If it hadn’t been for those hard sparkling stones, Haum would still be alive and this nightmare that was happening to them both wouldn’t be happening.

“I must get dressed. I don’t want to miss the bus.”

“There’s time.” He stretched out on the bed and lit a cigarette while he watched her slip into her clothes. As she went over to the mirror to tidy her hair, he said, “You understand what to do, Nhan? There must be no mistake. Blackie will call for you at ten o’clock tomorrow night. He will bring you to the old temple. I’ll be there at eleven. Don’t bring too many things . . . just a small suitcase. I’ll buy everything you want when we get to Hong Kong.”

“I understand.”

She put her comb back into her bag, then from the bag, she took out a small object and came over to him. She sat on the edge of the bed, looking seriously at him.

“I want you to keep this until we meet again.”

“What is it?”

She took his hand and put the object into it. Frowning, he held it up to examine it. It was a tiny Buddha carved in ivory.

“It belonged to my father,” she said. “It will protect you from harm. It is very powerful, Steve. Keep it with you. So long as you have it, no harm will come to you.”

He was touched by her simple faith.

“I’ll keep it,” he said. It didn’t occur to him the sacrifice she was making by giving the Buddha to him. All her life she had kept this little ivory carving. She relied on it for comfort: parting with it was giving away her most important and valuable possession. He put the Buddha on the table by his watch. “Well, kid, it won’t be long now.” He sat up, putting his arm around her. “I’ll be waiting for you. Don’t look so serious. It’s going to be all right.”

“Yes. I must go.” She touched his face with her fingers, then leaning forward she kissed his mouth. “Goodbye, Steve.”

He went with her to the door. “In another thirty and a quarter hours,” he said and smiled down at her. “So long till then.” He gave her a little hug, then stood back and watched her go swiftly down the stairs.

She didn’t look back.

He went over to the window and watched her walk down the dusty road. He admired her neat, upright carriage and the way she held her head.

During the drive back to Saigon, Nhan's mind became a torment of fear, apprehension and indecision. Without Steve's strength and confidence to support her, she felt lost and frighteningly alone.

After she had prepared supper for her three brothers, she told herself, she would go to the pagoda of Dakao and spend the night in prayer. She would light four candles. She wished now she hadn't given Steve her Buddha. She didn't think he would value it, and she felt lost without it. She was glad when the bus finally pulled up at the Central Market. She walked quickly along the pavement crowded with food vendors selling Chinese soup, the juice of sugar cane and dried meats. One vendor held out a stuffed snake towards her, grinning as she shied away, turning her head and quickening her steps. The evening sun was hot. The road crowded with hooting motorcars, pousse-pousse and bicycles created a strident violent movement that beat on her nerves. As she approached her apartment block, she didn't notice the black Citroen parked a few yards from the entrance to the block. Inspector NgoLinh sat in the car, a plainclothes detective at his side. Both men were smoking. The Inspector kept looking at his watch uneasily. The time was one minute past six.

The two men watched Nhan enter the apartment block and they exchanged glances.

"It could be her," the Inspector said and he got out of the car. "Wait here."

Nhan ran up the stairs to the second floor. She paused outside the front door of her apartment to calm herself. She must not frighten her brothers. It was going to be difficult to explain to them that she was going away. She must make them believe she was very happy. They were fond of her. If they believed she was really happy, they might not mind so much that she was leaving them.

She practised a smile tentatively. The muscles of her face were so stiff the smile was painful. She turned the handle, pushed open the door and walked into the living room.

The sight of a strange man standing in the middle of the room brought her to an abrupt halt. There was no one else in the room. She didn't have to be told that this man was from Security Police. The shabby

European suit, the expressionless face, the glittering alert eyes could belong to no one else except a member of Security Police.

She stood motionless, feeling the blood draining out of her heart and a sensation of cold passing over her body.

“You are Nhan Lee Quon?” the man asked in a hard, impersonal voice.

She tried to say something but no sound came. She became aware of quick footsteps coming down the passage, then Inspector NgocLinh came into the room.

She recognized him. The Inspector was well known in Saigon. She remembered what the fortuneteller had told her. The next two days will be the most critical in your life.

“You are Nhan Lee Quon?” the Inspector said, staring at her. “You are a taxi-dancer at the Paradise Club?”

“Yes.” She forced the word past her stiff lips.

“You are to come with me,” the Inspector said. He signalled to the detective who moved past her and opened the door. He went into the passage and stood waiting.

“Where is my mother?” Nhan asked.

The Inspector motioned to the bedroom door. “Come with me.”

“Could I not see her and my brothers?” Nhan asked.

“Not now — later.” He took hold of her arm and moved her out of the room.

The detective went on ahead, Nhan followed him, the Inspector brought up the rear.

Nhan had difficulty in going down the stairs. She was trembling violently. Once she stumbled, and the Inspector caught hold of her arm. He continued to hold her arm until they reached the lobby, then he released her.

The detective led the way to the car and opened the rear door. Nhan got into the car and the Inspector slid in beside her. Several people paused to stare. They knew this was a car belonging to Security Police. They wondered what the detectives were going to do with Nhan. The car pulled away and drove fast towards Headquarters. The

time was a minute to ten past six.

Nhan sat huddled up in the corner. Her mind was paralysed with terror. What was going to happen to her? Would she ever see Steve again?

It only took two minutes for the car to reach Headquarters. As soon as the car pulled up in the yard, the Inspector got out.

“Come,” he said.

Nhan got out. Her legs were so unsteady she would have fallen if he hadn't caught her arm. He hustled her through a doorway, along a passage, pushing her roughly ahead of him.

There was a door at the end of the passage. The Inspector knocked on the door, opened it and pushed Nhan into Colonel On-dinh-Khuc's office.

The Colonel sat at his desk, waiting. At another desk by the window Lam-Tham was busy with a bulky file. He didn't bother to look up when Nhan came in.

She stared at the Colonel, feeling a prickle of horror over her skin.

The Inspector pushed her in front of the desk.

“Nhan Lee Quon, sir,” he said.

The Colonel looked at his wrist watch. The time was fourteen minutes past six. “You are late,” he said.

The Inspector didn't say anything. There was a pause, then the Colonel waved him away. The Inspector went out of the room, gently closing the door behind him.

The Colonel stared for a long moment at Nhan, then he leaned forward, resting his fat hands on the blotter.

“You are Nhan Lee Quon?”

Nhan nodded.

“You are a taxi-dancer at the Paradise Club?”

Again she nodded.

“You have associated with an American, Steve Jaffe?”

Her heart contracted. The sound of Steve’s name stiffened her courage. For the first time since she had entered her apartment and had been confronted by the detective, her mind began to work. This man, sitting at the desk, wanted to know where Steve was. She would have to be very careful what she said. Whatever happened to her, this man mustn’t find Steve.

“Yes.”

“When did you last see him?”

She hesitated, then said, “Sunday evening.”

“You haven’t seen him since?”

“No.”

“Where is he?”

“I don’t know.”

The Colonel made an impatient movement. “I asked you where he is.”

“I don’t know.” This time there was no hesitation. “Where were you this afternoon?”

Be careful, Nhan told herself. Be very, very careful.

“I went for a walk.”

“Where?”

“I just walked.”

The Colonel reached out for a cigarette. He lit it while he stared at the girl.

“Listen to me,” he said. “I know you are lying. I intend to find the American. You know where he is. If you tell me and when I have found him, you will be released and you can return to your family. If you don’t tell me, I will force you to speak. It is important to the State that the American should be found. It is of no importance to the State what happens to you. There are many ways of making the most obstinate person tell us what we want to know. You will save yourself a great deal of suffering, if you tell the truth now and at once. If you

are obstinate, I will hand you over to men who are experts at making people talk. Do you understand?"

In twenty-nine hours, Nhan thought, Steve will be safe. If I can only keep silent until then, he will be out of their reach. Twenty-nine hours! The thought of those long hours stretching ahead of her like eternity filled her with cold despair.

"Do you understand?" the Colonel asked.

"Yes."

"Very well." He leaned further forward. "Where is the American, Jaffe?"

She raised her head and looked directly into the black eyes staring at her. "I don't know."

The Colonel stubbed out his cigarette, then pressed a button on the side of his desk.

There was a long pause while he began to examine some papers lying before him. Lam-Than got up and brought the file over. He put it down close to the Colonel's hand.

"You need only sign this, sir," he said. "It is of no importance."

Nhan felt tears running down her face. She brushed them away with the back of her hand. The sound of a door opening made her stiffen. The two little men who had drowned Dong Ham in a bucket of water came in. They paused just inside the room, waiting.

The Colonel signed the paper and handed the file to Lam-Than who returned to his desk, then he looked at the two little men.

"This woman has information I want quickly," he said. "Take her away and break her obstinacy. Work quickly, but whatever you have to do to her to make her talk, be very sure she does not die."

As the two little men moved towards her, Nhan began to scream.

Colonel On-dinh-Khuc was finishing a meal of Cha Gio and crabmeat which he washed down with warm Chinese wine. From time to time he glanced at the gold clock on his desk. The time was twenty minutes to nine.

The woman had been in the hands of his men now for three hours. The fact that the information he was waiting for hadn't already been conveyed to him surprised him. Up to now his men had been able to obtain information from their victims very speedily. This delay irritated him, but he had considerable confidence in his men. It was this woman and her ridiculous obstinacy that irritated him. He made a snarling grimace. Well, she was paying dearly for her obstinacy. His men were without pity. He wouldn't wish to be a woman in their hands.

He pushed aside his bowl and reached for an apple. This he polished on his sleeve before sinking his teeth into it. He was chewing slowly, relishing the taste of the apple when there came a tap on the door and Lam-Than came in.

"The woman is now ready to talk," he said. "Do you wish to question her yourself?"

The Colonel took another bite from the apple.

"She has taken her time. What degree of severity was used?"

"The maximum," Lam-Than said. "Knowing you wanted the information quickly, she was subjected to continuous pressure. She has only given in a few moments ago."

The Colonel finished his apple, then pushed back his chair and got to his feet.

"I will question her myself," he said. "Come with me."

They left the office and walked down a passage, down a flight of stairs to the room where prisoners were questioned.

It was a small room: its floor and walls tiled in white. A steel table, its feet clamped to the floor, stood under a powerful ceiling lamp.

Nhan lay on the table, her wrists and ankles held by straps. Her eyes were closed. Her face drawn and lined was greenish yellow. She breathed unevenly in short shuddering gasps.

The two little men squatted side by side away from her.

Both of them looked sweaty and bored. They stood up when the Colonel came in.

He went over to Nhan and stood looking down at her. "Well? Where is the American, Jaffe?"

Nhan's eyes opened slowly: they were misty as if she were only half conscious. She mumbled something the Colonel couldn't hear.

One of the little men came over to her and slapped her face. Her eyes opened wider and she cringed. Tears began to run down her face.

"Where is the American, Jaffe?"

The continuous torture she had been subjected to and the resulting agony had warned Nhan that further resistance was out of the question. She might, she told herself, be able to remain silent for perhaps another hour, but sooner or later, unless she gained a respite, she would break down and betray Steve. Already by suffering and resisting she had gained three hours for him, but the twenty-six remaining hours that stretched ahead of her before he would be safe was, she knew, an impossible test of endurance: she had to gain time. She had to convince this man bending over her that Steve was somewhere far from Thudaumot. While they were looking for him in this place, she would be able to gain strength to resist the next assault on her shuddering body.

"In Dalat," she whispered and closed her eyes.

A few months ago Steve had taken her for a weekend to Dalat; a summer resort in the mountains where people went to escape the heat of the City. She remembered it well enough to lie about it.

"Where in Dalat?" the Colonel asked, scowling.

"In a house."

"Who owns the house?"

"An American."

"Where is the house?"

"It is the third house by the railway station: a house with a red roof and a yellow gate," Nhan said, keeping her eyes closed, terrified he

would know she was lying.

The Colonel drew in a deep breath.

“He is there now?”

“Yes.”

The Colonel leaned closer, his little eyes gleaming. He whispered so no one but Nhan could hear him. “He has the diamonds with him?”

“Yes.”

The Colonel straightened.

“Come,” he said to Lam-Than. “I’ve wasted enough time already. I’m going to Dalat immediately.”

Lam-Than was looking at Nhan.

“She may be lying to gain time,” he said.

The Colonel’s face darkened.

“She wouldn’t dare! If she lied to me I would cut her to pieces!” He caught hold of Nhan’s arm and shook her.

“Listen to me!” the Colonel snarled. “Are you lying? You’d better tell the truth. If I find you are lying, you will regret it.”

Nhan shook her head weakly.

She forced herself to say in a quavering voice, “It is the truth. He is in Dalat.”

The Colonel pushed the little man away.

“She isn’t lying,” he said. “She has had enough. She has been a fool to have resisted so long.” He started towards the door, then paused to look at the two little men. “Give her water and let her rest. Turn off the light. I will return in about ten hours. I’ll decide then what is to be done with her.”

Nhan began to sob convulsively. Ten hours! With ten hours rest and only another sixteen hours to endure: surely she could hang on?

Back in his office, the Colonel told Lam-Than to call Inspector

NgocLinh. He and I will go to Dalat,” the Colonel said. “When we have killed the American and I have the diamonds, I will get rid of the Inspector. The American will have shot him, and in trying to protect the Inspector, I will have been forced to kill the American.”

“You may not find the American there,” Lam-Than said. “I still think she could be lying.”

“He will be there,” the Colonel snarled. “Your pessimism bores me. She was not lying.”

Lam-Than bowed. He wasn’t convinced. He went away to fetch the Inspector.

chapter fourteen

I

It took five hours of difficult driving to reach Dalat. The road wasn't good, and although the Colonel kept urging the Inspector to drive faster, the Inspector was handicapped by the darkness, and the surface of the road.

They arrived at the Dalat railway station at two o'clock a.m. It took the Colonel a little over half an hour to convince himself there was no house near the station with a red roof and a yellow gate.

The violence of his fury when he realized that Nhan had lied to him made the Inspector recoil from him. It was fortunate for Nhan that his maniacal rage made rational thought impossible. His only desire was to get back to Saigon as fast as he could and get his hands on this woman who had dared to have sent him on a wild goose chase. If he had paused to think, he would have gone to the police post and telephoned Lam-Than telling him to recommence torturing Nhan immediately, but he was past thinking.

He got back into the car and screamed at the Inspector to return to Saigon. The Inspector drove as fast as he dared, but it wasn't fast enough. The Colonel suddenly yelled at him to stop and get out of the driving seat. He got under the wheel himself, and for the next twenty miles the Inspector sat stiff with fear as the car roared madly down the winding road at a speed that invited disaster.

It wasn't long before the accident happened. Coming out of a sharp bend at an impossible speed, the car suddenly skidded, the off-side tyre burst and the car slammed into the face of the mountain.

Although both men were severely shaken, neither of them were injured. It took them some minutes to recover. On inspection, the car was found to be wrecked beyond repair.

The accident had happened on a lonely stretch of the road. The Inspector knew there was no chance of any car passing at this time in the morning. The nearest police post was thirty miles away. There was

nothing to do but to sit by the side of the road and wait for the first car to come from Dalat.

The two men waited seven hours before an old, dilapidated Citroen, driven by a Chinese peasant, came panting up the mountain road. The time now was ten o'clock and the heat of the sun had made the long wait unpleasant.

The Colonel hadn't spoken a word to the Inspector during the wait. He had sat on a rock, smoking cigarette after cigarette, his cruel yellow face set in an expression that chilled the Inspector's blood.

It took them another two hours to crawl to the police post in the panting Citroen. The Inspector telephoned for a fast car to be sent immediately.

The Colonel sent no message to Lam-Than. He wished now to deal with Nhan personally. Nothing else could satisfy the vicious fury that boiled inside him.

He arrived at Security Police Headquarters at half past one. He dismissed the Inspector, and then went to his private quarters where he took a shower, and changed his uniform. He had lunch. The atmosphere from his pent-up rage and the expression on his face terrified his servants.

Lam-Than, hearing that his master had returned, came into his room while the Colonel was eating his lunch.

The Colonel looked up. With his mouth crammed with food, he snarled, "Get out!"

Startled by the mad gleam in the small bloodshot eyes, Lam-Than hurriedly backed out of the room.

At twenty minutes past two, the Colonel finished his meal. He got to his feet. With thick, unsteady fingers, he undid the glittering buttons of his tunic which he took off and tossed on a chair. Then he went to the door, opened it and walked with a heavy measured tread down the passage, down the stairs to the room where Nhan still lay strapped to the steel table.

The two executioners were squatting patiently either side of the door. They stood up when they saw the Colonel. "You will wait here," he said, "until I call you."

He opened the door and went into the room, closing the door behind him. His hand groped for the lightswitch and turned it on.

Nhan was blinded for some seconds when the violent cruel light beat down on her. Then she saw the Colonel standing looking down at her. The expression on his face turned her sick.

Steve! Steve! she thought wildly. Come and save me! Please; come and save me!

But she knew Steve wasn't coming. This was the moment she had waited for when she had lain in the dark, knowing it would come. This was the moment she had gained time for, to gain strength to keep silent.

She stiffened her will.

He won't make me talk, she said to herself. Whatever he does to me, I will keep silent. I want Steve to get away. I want him to be happy with his money. Oh, Steve, Steve, Steve, don't forget me. Think of me sometimes. Please, please don't forget me.

Then as the Colonel bent over her and put his hands on her, she began to scream.

Outside the room, the two executioners had squatted down again. It was cool and restful in the passage. There was nothing to disturb them for the room into which the Colonel had entered was soundproof.

At half past two, the Dakota from Phnom-Penh arrived at the Saigon airport.

Blackie Lee sat in his car waiting for his brother to pass the Customs and Immigration barriers. He had to make a conscious effort not to look across the car park where the black Citroen was parked. The car had followed him from the club. He had now identified the two detectives in the car. He knew they were from Security Police Headquarters.

He wasn't unduly alarmed although he found it a little unnerving to be followed wherever he went. If they had a case against him, he argued to himself, they wouldn't be wasting time following him. They would arrest him. Since he had survived so far, he didn't intend to be stampeded into flight. He had, at first, thought that he would go with Charlie and Jaffe in the helicopter, but it would mean not only leaving his club, but also Yu-lan. There was too much money tied up in the

dub to run away at the first sign of danger.

Charlie Lee came out of the airport. He walked with a springy step of a successful man as he crossed over to Blackie's car.

"All right?" Blackie asked as he opened the off-side door.

"Very satisfactory," Charlie said. "Nothing to worry about at all."

Blackie drove the car out onto the main road. He glanced into the driving mirror. The black Citroen was moving slowly behind him.

He drove carefully back to Saigon. He didn't tell Charlie about the following car. There would be time for that when they got back to the club. He listened to Charlie's recital of his arrangement with Lee Watkins.

"There will be no hitch," Charlie concluded. "He is trustworthy. Did you get the gun?"

Blackie nodded.

"When you have had a rest," he said, "I think you should see Nhan and talk to her. Don't tell her too many details, but warn her to be ready by ten. Make sure she doesn't take too many things with her. These Vietnamese girls cling to their possessions."

"It is a pity we have to bother with her," Charlie said.

"We can't avoid it. The American won't leave without her. I am sure of that."

The car pulled up outside the Club. As the two men got out, Blackie noticed the Citroen had already parked further down the road. He didn't notice Yo-Yo watching them from the shade of the tree opposite the club.

When the two men had gone up the stairs and out of sight, Yo-Yo stood up and walking casually, his hands in his pockets, crossed the road and entered the club.

He had seen Yu-lan go out a few minutes before Blackie and his brother had arrived. It occurred to him the club might be empty, and he might just possibly get a chance to overhear a conversation between the two brothers that would give him a clue to what was going on.

Moving silently, he walked into the club. There was no one in the big hall. He tiptoed across the dance floor until he reached the door leading into Blackie's office. He could hear voices. Pressing his ear against the panel of the door, he listened.

Blackie was telling his brother about the Security Police and being followed. Charlie listened with growing alarm.

"I don't understand it," Blackie said. "If they had any proof, they would arrest me. It may be nothing to do with Jaffe. There was that currency deal last month."

"I don't like it," Charlie said. "I think you should come with me tonight. It may be nothing, but you mustn't take risks. There will be room in the helicopter for the four of us."

"I've thought of that, but what will happen to Yu-lan? If I leave now, they'll never let her get out. Besides, I can't just walk out of this place. When I do go, I intend to sell it. I must take a chance, Charlie."

"You could be sorry. I don't like it."

"I don't like it either. I'll think about it. There's time. I have until ten tonight to make up my mind." There was a pause, then he went on, "I have a million piastres in the safe, Charlie. I think you had better take the money with you. If anything goes wrong, it will be something for Yu-lan if she can get to Hong Kong. Will you do that for me?"

"Of course," Charlie said. "I still think you should come with me. If they've found out you know about the diamonds and where Jaffe is hiding, they will wipe you out."

"If they knew that," Blackie said bleakly, "I wouldn't be here talking to you now. I'll let you know definitely by tonight what I am going to do. In the meantime, will you see the girl? She has got to be ready by ten. There must be no delay."

Charlie got to his feet. "I'll go now," he said, "then I'll come back and have a nap. I won't get much sleep tonight."

Yo-Yo moved silently away from the door: his thin vicious face alight with excitement. He concealed himself behind a curtain that covered the entrance to the kitchens.

He heard Blackie and Charlie come out of the office. Blackie accompanied his brother as far as the entrance to the club.

"I don't think they're interested in you," Blackie said, "but be careful you are not followed."

When his brother had gone down the stairs, Blackie returned to his office. He looked through the shutters into the street. The two detectives still sat in the Citroen. He saw his brother walk briskly away. No one seemed to pay him any attention.

A slight sound behind him made him look sharply over his shoulder.

Yo-Yo stood in the doorway, smiling at him.

"Hello, Mr. Blackie," he said and came into the office, closing the door behind him.

Blackie had a sudden premonition of danger. How long had this little rat been in the club? Had he heard anything?

"What do you want?"

"I've been listening, Mr. Blackie," Yo-Yo said. "I want that million piastres you have in your safe. If you don't give it to me, I'll tell those two detectives out there you know where. Jaffe is. You know what they'll do to you if I tell them that." Blackie eyed Yo-Yo thoughtfully. Yo-Yo was slim and wiry, but Blackie knew that once he got his hands on the boy, he could easily master him. He would have to kill him. He had no other alternative. Already he had made up his mind that sooner or later he would have to murder the boy.

"What million piastres?" he asked, moving casually forward. "What are you talking about?"

Yo-Yo with the swiftness of a striking snake whipped a knife from his hip pocket. Its long, glittering blade threatened Blackie.

"Don't come any nearer," Yo-Yo said. "Just give me the money."

Sweat broke out on Blackie's face. The sight of the knife filled him with sick fear. Then he remembered the gun in his safe. It was fitted with a silencer. He would open the safe, pretending to get the money, then he would grab the gun, turn and shoot.

He pretended to hesitate. He remained motionless, staring at Yo-Yo.

"Hurry!" Yo-Yo said. "Give me the money!"

Blackie lifted his shoulders in resigned surrender. He took from his

pocket the safe key, crossed the room and unlocked the safe. He had to kneel to reach in the safe. His broad back covered his movements. His hand closed around the butt of the gun as Yo-Yo silently crept up behind him.

As Blackie lifted the gun and tensed his muscles to bring his body upright, an agonizing pain hit him between his shoulder blades. His hand slipped off the gun and he fell forward. The agony was repeated as Yo-Yo stabbed him again.

II

A little after five o'clock, the telephone bell rang in Lam-Than's office. With an impatient exclamation, Lam-Than put down his pen and picked up the receiver. He listened to the excited voice on the line. What he heard made him stiffen in his chair.

He said, "You are certain of this? There can be no mistake?" He listened while the voice beat against his eardrum, then he said, "Very well," and hung up.

He sat for a long moment staring down at his desk, then he got to his feet and went swiftly along the passage to Colonel On-dinh-Khuc's office. He knocked and entered. The office was empty. He paused in the doorway, frowning and looking around. He saw the Colonel's tunic lying on a chair and he immediately guessed where he was.

He hurried to the questioning room. The two executioners, guarding the door, looked at him inquiringly.

"Is the Colonel in there?" Lam-Than asked.

One of them nodded.

Lam-Than turned the handle of the door and pushed the door open. He stepped into the room and immediately closed the door on the curious staring gaze of the two executioners.

With a growl like that of a wild animal, the Colonel turned quickly and glared at him. Lam-Than looked past the Colonel at the table and his mouth tightened.

“Get out!” the Colonel snarled.

“You must leave immediately, sir,” Lam-Than said, speaking distinctly and quickly. “A warrant for your arrest was signed half an hour ago. You are being charged with the murder of the woman, My-Lang-To. The driver of the jeep who killed her has confessed he did so on your instructions.”

The Colonel leaned forward and peered at Lam-Than. The muscles in his heavy face suddenly went slack.

“They can’t arrest me,” he snarled. “No one can arrest me!”

“The warrant has been signed by the President,” Lam-Than said. Did she tell you where the American is hiding?”

The Colonel leaned against the wall. He seemed crushed and defeated.

“I cannot understand it,” he said, and there was dazed wonder in his voice. “Nothing I did to her would make her speak. A woman like that . . . perhaps after all she really didn’t know.”

Lam-Than shrugged his shoulders.

If you can reach the Bien Hoa airport you have a chance of reaching Phnom-Penh,” he said. “They may not have thought of alerting the airport. You must go at once.”

Even as he spoke there came the sound of tramping feet down the passage and the two men looked at each other.

Lam-Than shrugged his shoulders. He moved away from the Colonel as if disassociating himself from him.

The door opened and Inspector NgocLinh appeared in the doorway. Behind him were four policemen armed with rifles.

The Inspector looked from the Colonel to the body on the table. He felt the wall of his stomach tighten with horror. Then he turned and signalled to the policemen who filed into the room. He pointed to the Colonel.

“Arrest this man.”

As the police formed a group around the Colonel, the Inspector said to him, “In the name of the Republic, I arrest you for the murder of MyLang-To. You will also be charged with the murder of this woman,

Nhan Lee Quon.” He turned to Lam-Than. “You too are under arrest as an accessory to both murders.” He nodded to the policemen. Take them away.”

Colonel On-dinh-Khuc straightened himself and squared his shoulders. He marched out of the room at the head of his escort. Lam-Than limped after him.

The Inspector beckoned to one of the executioners who was standing in the doorway, staring. “Get a blanket and cover this woman,” he said.

When the executioner had gone, the Inspector moved closer to the table. Because he was a devout Catholic and still had some pity left in him, he made the sign of the cross over Nhan’s body, then turning, he went out of the room, closing the door behind him.

III

Charlie Lee stood in the doorway of his brother’s office and stared unbelievably at Blackie’s dead body lying before the open safe.

It was some minutes before he forced himself to move into the room. He closed the door and locked it, then he went over to his brother and made sure he was dead.

The shock made him feel weak and old. He went to the desk and sat down. He wept for a little while, his face buried in his hands. Blackie had been part of his life. He felt lonely and defenceless now. He could not imagine what his future would be like without his brother. But after a while, he got over the shock. He suddenly realized now that Blackie was dead, there would be no need to share the two million American dollars, and with that sum of money, he should be able to face life without his brother.

Getting to his feet he went to the safe and peered into it. He saw the gun and took it from the safe. A quick glance told him the million piastres were missing. Some sneak-thief must have killed Blackie and taken the money, he thought, but there was no point in wasting regrets on this loss.

Everything was now going wrong. He had spoken to Nhan's uncle who had told him Nhan had been arrested and had been taken to Security Police Headquarters for questioning. This information had alarmed him and he had hurried back to warn his brother that not only Jaffe's hiding place was in danger but Blackie might expect to be arrested at any moment. Charlie had no doubt that when submitted to torture, the girl would betray them all.

There was still a slim chance of getting his hands on the diamonds if he acted quickly. He would take Blackie's car and go immediately to Thudaumot. He would take Jaffe to the agreed landing place. They would wait there until the helicopter arrived. He was sure it would be fatal to tell Jaffe that Nhan had been arrested. He would say that Blackie was bringing her later. When the helicopter arrived, he would try to persuade Jaffe to leave. If he wouldn't leave without the girl, then he would have to kill him.

Charlie put the gun in his briefcase: the long silencer made it impossible for him to carry the gun in his pocket.

He paused to look at his brother's body. He was distressed to think that Yu-lan would find Blackie, but he didn't dare wait for her return. He would write to her from Hong Kong, he told himself, trying to ease his pricking conscience. He would invite her to come and live with him.

Carrying the briefcase under his arm, he left the club and went over to where Blackie's car was parked. He glanced at the police car up the road. The two detectives looked at him indifferently and then returned to reading their newspapers. He wondered if they would follow him, but as he drove away, he saw the black Citroen hadn't moved.

"He reached Thudaumot after five o'clock. He parked the car by the lacquer factory and then walked over to the little wooden villa. From his window, Jaffe saw him coming. Charlie was sufficiently like his brother for Jaffe to recognize him. What was he doing here at this hour? Jaffe wondered. Had something gone wrong? Was there to be a new arrangement?

Nhan's grandfather had gone out and Jaffe was alone in the villa. He hurried down the stairs and opened the front door.

Charlie entered, giving Jaffe a little bow.

"I am Charlie Lee," he said. "Blackie has told you about me?"

“Yes. Why are you here? Has something gone wrong?”

“Not badly wrong,” Charlie said. During the drive to Thudaumot, he had carefully rehearsed his lies. “But it is necessary for you to leave here immediately. Blackie has heard from a friend at Police Headquarters that your hiding place is now known. The police are already on their way to arrest you.”

Jaffe stiffened.

“How did they find out?”

“I will explain everything later,” Charlie said. “You must leave immediately. There is not a minute to lose.”

“Where’s Nhan?” Jaffe asked.

“She is quite safe. Blackie is looking after her. She will join us in a few hours. If you have anything you want to take with you, please get it. I have the car here. We must leave at once.”

“You are sure she is safe?”

“Of course. Please hurry.”

Jaffe hesitated, then he mounted the stairs two at a time, went into his bedroom and threw his few possessions into his canvas holdall. He put the police gun inside his shirt. He made sure he had the tin containing the diamonds in his hip pocket, then he picked up his holdall and moved to the door. He paused for a final look round.

On the bedside table stood Nhan’s little ivory Buddha. Jaffe grinned as he went over to it and picked it up.

She said as long as I have it, no harm will come to me, he thought. I’d better take it along with me. Funny superstitious kid, but she means well.

He dropped the Buddha into his shirt pocket, then joined Charlie in the hall.

“Wait here,” Charlie said. “I’ll bring the car to the door. Get in the back and lie on the floor. You mustn’t be seen.”

While he waited for Charlie to bring the car, Jaffe tried to steady his alarmed mind and to assess the consequences of his hiding place now being known.

Nhan's grandfather and her family were certain to suffer.

What have I done to these people? Jaffe thought. I am a crazy, selfish sonofabitch. Is Nhan really safe?

Charlie tapped the horn button of the car impatiently.

I won't even be able to say goodbye to the old man, Jaffe thought as he moved into the hot sunshine. If I had any guts I would stay right here and warn him to get out when he comes back.

Charlie had opened the rear door of the car. He was beckoning to Jaffe. "Come quickly," he called.

With a feeling of shame, Jaffe ran down the path and scrambled into the back of the car. He lay on the floor of the car. Charlie slammed the door, then he trod on the gas and the car shot away.

As the car roared down the dusty road towards Ben Cat, Jaffe kept thinking of Nhan. He still had five and a half hours before the helicopter was due to arrive. Much could happen in that time.

Charlie had to stop once or twice to consult his map. He told Jaffe that the landing-ground couldn't be far, but it was nearly seven o'clock and growing dusk by the time Charlie finally located the exact place.

He saw at once that it was a good place for concealment. There was a thick fringe of bamboo in a half circle before a disused rice field which was burned into a hard mass of dark mud by the sun, and it was very suitable for a helicopter landing.

The rice field was concealed from the road by trees and shrubs. As the car bumped over the rough ground, black and lemon butterflies as big as bats rose out of the bamboos while egrets flew in panic across the darkening sky.

Charlie brought the car to a halt and got out. Jaffe, his legs stiff and his body aching from the cramped ride, also got out.

"We must prepare two large bonfires," Charlie said. "The pilot will have trouble locating this place. When we hear him coming, we will set fire to the bonfires."

"He won't be here for four hours," Jaffe said. "There is plenty of time. How did the police find out I was at the old man's place?"

“You were seen at the window,” Charlie said, remembering what Yo-Yo had told Blackie. “There is a reward offered for information about you. This peasant who saw you claimed the reward.”

Jaffe cursed himself for being so careless.

“But how did you find this out?” he persisted.

“Blackie has a good friend at Police Headquarters,” Charlie lied.

“What will they do with the old man?”

“You needn’t worry about him. They will do nothing. The newspaper carrying the offer for the reward doesn’t circulate in Thudaumot. How was he to know you were wanted by the police?”

Jaffe relaxed slightly. It was the kind of news he wanted to hear so he readily accepted it.

“And Nhan? Where is she?”

“She is safe,” Charlie said. “She is with Blackie. When it is dark Blackie will bring her here.” He began to move away. “We should begin to build the bonfires.”

The two men parted and began to collect sticks and dried grass.

While he worked, Charlie wondered if he could persuade the American to leave without Nhan. It was a risk. He might refuse. Charlie realized that it would be safer to kill him before the helicopter arrived. He couldn’t kill him if Watkins was there. Watkins would blackmail him for the rest of his life.

He looked across the rice field to where Jaffe was working. The American’s massive figure was outlined against the darkening sky.

Charlie decided he must wait until it was darker, then he would get the gun, conceal it by his side and when he was close to Jaffe, he would shoot him at pointblank range. He would tell Watkins his passenger had changed his mind and wasn’t coming. He would go with Watkins to Kratie. By this time tomorrow he would be safe in Hong Kong with two million dollars’ worth of diamonds.

He was glad to have the bonfire to build. It took his mind off Jaffe. It was just after eight when the two men completed their tasks. By then it was so dark, Charlie had difficulty in finding the car.

He could see Jaffe coming across the field by the red spar of his cigarette. He opened the car door and felt around on the floor for his briefcase, but he couldn't find it. In a sudden sweating panic, he got into the car, turned on the dashlight and looked frantically on the floor, but his briefcase wasn't there. He could have sworn he had put it on the floor just before he had got out of the car. Maybe it had fallen out of the car as he had got out. It must have fallen out As he got out of the car, Jaffe loomed out of the darkness.

What were you showing a light for?" Jaffe demanded. "It could have been seen from the road."

Charlie felt a trickle of cold sweat run down his face. "Yes," he said, trying to steady his voice. "I should have thought of that."

He was cautiously moving his foot over the ground, trying to locate the briefcase, but he felt nothing. He moved back a few steps and again started searching the ground with his foot.

"What time will Nhan arrive?" Jaffe asked, coming round the car to join Charlie.

Suppose the American stumbled on the briefcase? Charlie thought, his heart beating so hard he felt stifled. If he picked it up, he would feel the gun through the thin leather of the case. He moved forward, meeting Jaffe before Jaffe reached the door of the car.

"She won't be late," Charlie said. "She'll be here just before eleven."

Jaffe peered at his wristwatch.

"Nearly three hours to wait. I guess I'll sit in the car."

"The other side," Charlie said, backing away to cover the driver's door. "You'll be more comfortable."

"I wish I had a drink," Jaffe said as he started around the car towards the passenger's seat. "This is going to be a hell of a long wait." Charlie bent down and hurriedly searched the grass with his hands. It was so dark he could see nothing. Sweat ran into his eyes. He groped as far under the car as he could reach, but his questing hands failed to find the briefcase. Then suddenly he heard Jaffe say, "Hello . . . what's this?"

With a feeling of sick dismay, Charlie realized somehow he must have kicked the briefcase across the car and it had fallen out on the

passenger's side. Jaffe had found it! He ran round the car. "It's my briefcase," he said, his voice quivering with panic. "Let me have it please."

"Wait a minute." The hard note in Jaffe's voice brought Charlie to a standstill. "You've got a gun in here. What do you want a gun for?"

"It belongs to the pilot," Charlie said desperately. "He lent it to Blackie. I — I promised to return it. May I have it please?"

Jaffe was stiff with suspicion. He opened the briefcase and took out the gun. His fingers felt along the long barrel of the silencer.

"May I have it please?" Charlie repeated but without hope.

"No. I'll give it to the pilot," Jaffe said. "I don't like guns lying around. Get in the car!"

Moving like an old man, Charlie opened the car door and got in. Jaffe went to the rear of the car and got in the back.

"You sit still," Jaffe said. "I'm watching you."

Charlie could have wept with despair. For the past fifteen years everything he had touched had gone wrong. Either he had handled his deals badly or else he never had any luck. This was crushing bad "Irk. If he hadn't dropped the briefcase . . .

"This is a pretty convenient gun for a murder," Jaffe said. "You weren't thinking of murdering me, were you?"

"Such an idea never crossed my mind," Charlie said, trying to speak with dignity. "Why should I murder you?"

"Just sit still and keep quiet," Jaffe said. "If you make any sudden move, I'll shoot you through the back of your head."

Charlie slumped down in his seat, crushed. He had lost his brother, and through the worst of bad luck he had lost the gun. He was defenceless against the strength of the American. Now he would never lay his hands on the diamonds.

Watching him, Jaffe fingered the gun. He was trying to control a sick fear that was growing in his mind. Was Nhan really safe? he kept asking himself. Was this story that the gun belonged to the pilot a lie? If it was a lie, and this little Chinese had planned to kill him,

something almost certainly had happened to Nhan.

But there was nothing he could do but wait to see if she arrived. Suppose she didn't arrive? What was he going to do? What could he do? If he went to Saigon to look for her, he would walk into a hornet's nest, and yet he couldn't bear the idea of going without her.

The hours dragged by. Jaffe's nerves became stretched to breaking point as he kept looking at his watch. Charlie had remained silent during the wait. He was past caring now about anything. All he wanted was to get back to his tiny sordid apartment in Hong Kong and forget the whole miserable adventure.

At twenty minutes to eleven, Jaffe could keep silent no longer.

"Damn you!" he suddenly burst out. "Where is she? Why doesn't she come?"

The violence of his voice scared Charlie.

"What is the time?" he asked timidly.

"It's twenty to eleven."

Jaffe suddenly leaned forward and pressed the barrel of the gun against the back of Charlie's neck.

"Listen to me," he said viciously, "I think you're lying! I think you planned to murder me to get the diamonds! What's happened to Nhan? I'll blow your damn head off if you don't tell me!"

He sounds mad enough to do it, Charlie thought, stiff with terror. When he realizes she isn't coming, he'll kill me.

This is not "The End"